

Author's Note - I would like to acknowledge and dedicate this work towards Barb, who is (In my opinion) the premier author of HP Fan Fiction. Her work with the Psychic Serpent Trilogy introduced me to the world of HP Fan Fiction and gave me many nights of joy at the various stories. To this day I still do not know which I like more. JKR's work or hers. She is my inspiration, and I hope that one day she will see this story and enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed hers.

A/N 2 - This is a new version from the previous one. It has been entirely rewritten.

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## Prologue

### In the Eyes of a Child

Six hours. Just six hours ago Voldemort had died. At last. As Harry Potter stood at the top of the grand stairs and looked out the window of Hogwarts he still had trouble wrapping his mind around the thought. It was over. Some might have said it was justified. Some might have said it was wrong to feel that way. A sin. But as Harry Potter's gaze swept the battlements of Hogwarts and the cratered grounds of the school that was littered with dead Death-Eaters, he smiled. Not a smile of relief. A smile of satisfaction. Many had said across the centuries, that revenge was a bitter pill to swallow. They were wrong. For Harry it was ambrosia.

Full circle he'd come. He was born, he died, but lived. He resurrected Voldemort and died and lived again. Into the abyss on a rope of chance and he came out smelling like roses. He was alive and Tom was dead. Fred, Cedric, little Colin Creevy; Remus, Tonks and wise old Dumbledore. Sirius and his dad and his proud eyes. His flame haired mum and her loving embrace. All lost. All Avenged! At the point of a wand and at the height of his power, bastard, Tom Riddle lost to a school boy. Brought low by his own magic turned against him. Poetic Justice indeed.

The singing crescendo of a group of celebrators distracted him for a moment and he idly looked over the banister down the long flights to see several men in tattered and torn robes, drunk off their ass, dancing in a circle and singing off key. Some little tune about him, no doubt invented by Peeves. Harry put them aside and turned inward again. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and adjusted his invisibility cloak. He wanted to be alone. The cloak was the only way, even from his friends. A soothing breeze swayed the trees of the forbidden forest and Harry opened the cloak a bit to allow the fresh wind to caress his tired face when it finally arrived at the castle walls. He took a deep breath and let it out with a vicious sigh.

The winds of change. The winds of the future. He paused a moment at that thought. Future. He'd never thought about the future before. He'd always just lived in the present. He couldn't afford to think about life when, at any moment, he could have died. The sudden luxury of that thought was both a high that the strongest muggle narcotic couldn't produce and a nauseating empty vortex that tore him in a dozen different directions. What did he want? What was he supposed to do now? He was born to fulfill The Prophecy and that was done with. The world started to close in a round him. The walls slide together and crushed him. The wind was smothering and the torches baked his skin. The bought of claustrophobia caused him to tear away the cloak and go racing down the stairs and through the halls. Trying his best to outrun his fear. Not of death, but now of life. Of that void he saw when he looked into the future.

He finally slowed down and panted to catch his breath. When he stood him he found that he was at the Headmaster's statue. It was still knocked aside, no one having yet repaired it. 'That's it!' he thought. 'Dumbledore would know. He could tell me.' He stepped past the sleeping and broken thing and ran up the stairs and burst into the office. Thankfully it was still empty. The portraits, who were still celebrating themselves, quieted and looked at the young boy with pride and awe. Dumbledore, who was chatting amicably, faced his greatest pupil with kind, but knowing eyes.

"Harry," the portrait said, "Twice within a day. I am touched."

"It's nothing, Professor," he stammered out, "I just had a few questions."

"Of course, my boy. Anything at all. The time for secrets is past. Now is the time for confidences."

"Well sir, now that he's dead and all; Voldemort I mean; I was wondering...well..." he threw up his arms and let them fall back to his sides.

"Now you are wondering, since your quest is finished and The Prophecy is fulfilled, what, if anything, your are to do with your life?"

Harry blinked. "Erm-well...yeah."

Dumbledore sighed and gave a sad smile. "That's one question I can't answer for you, Harry. It's your life and your future. It's your book to write how you see fit. In a very real way, you are just beginning your life, Harry. You have a magnificent opportunity for happiness because you, unlike others, know how to cherish the most precious of moments and have faced the greatest of trials. Whatever you do decide to do, I know that you will do so with all your heart and all of your boundless courage."

Harry thought it over for a moment. "But, where do I start? I mean, people usually have built up things by now. Have a life to begin a foundation to build something off of. I don't have anything," he grew frustrated towards the end and ran a hand through his dirty and rumpled hair.

"You are wrong, Harry. You have friends and a family in the Weasley's, and if I may so, a rather budding romance with Miss. Weasley. You have your Hogwarts education and a world of opportunity open to you. That's more than enough to begin." His face grew thoughtful for a moment. "But perhaps a push is needed. A pointed, shall we say, in the right direction."

"Oh, please, sir," Harry begged fervently. "Right now it just seems like a bottomless pit."

"I understand, Harry. I've always found retracing my footsteps to be most helpful. To your roots, we shall go. That solid ground that we stand on. Tell me, Harry. What has given you the greatest happiness in life?"

"My friends," he answered immediately. No contest there.

Dumbledore chuckled. "An excellent and wise answer, my boy, but you can't build a life off of only relationships. What about your life so far as seemed best? The most 'right?'"

Harry scratched his head. That was harder. Then it clicked. What saved him from the horrid Dursely's. "Well sir. I'd guess magic. When I first came to Hogwarts I thought it was the greatest place in the world."

"Then that's an excellent place to start. Find that joy again. Embrace it, nurture it. I feel that if you can find that spark and excitement that you had when you stepped into these halls, you will find your path."

Harry turned that around in his mind. Took it apart and looked at it from several angles. Put the pieces together in new and different ways. It suddenly popped into his mind. A small promise he made when he was floating across the lake in the boat. He was silently told himself that he would learn everything he could about magic. He would be a wizard that his parents could be proud of. That was it. He would continue learning. Only this time without the distractions of fighting for his life. It all clicked. The stories, the adventures. Every little thing he had found envious about other people's life. Freedom. He would wander the world and learn all he could about magic. He would see places and meet different people. From there he would build and begin. He had enough still in his vault to survive on for several more years.

Harry beamed a smile at his dead mentor. "Thanks, Professor. I know what I'm going to do."

"Anytime, Harry. Anytime. Harry, please remember this before you go. You are my greatest student. Almost a grandson to me. Never hesitate to come to me if you need anything. Even trapped in

parchment and paint, I can sway enough people to aid you with any trouble. Do not forget that. And live, Harry. Live a grand life. A splendid life, so in the doddering old years that I myself reached you can look back on them and see a majestic mountain of memories. Live, Harry. Live well”

Harry blinked his glassy eyes rapidly, to banish the tears. “I won’t sir-I will...and...thank you.” he didn’t really know what else to say. He was never good at expressing his own feelings. He had a feeling though that Dumbledore knew he felt the same way about him. He turned and walked out among a scattering of applause and fare-wells.

His feet wandered the halls. His eyes rapidly being filed away in his mind. The places he wanted to see, the things he wanted to know. With each step he grew more excited. When he got to the doors of the Great Hall he stopped. They were still celebrating. Music and voices. Laughter and cheering broke past the sturdy wooden doors. Something made him stop. His friends. Ginny. Regardless how excited he was, he still felt empty. He needed to begin anew. To build up something separate from them. The minutes past as he stood frozen in front of the doors. His heart hammering painfully in his chest. He knew that if he wanted to go this way, what he would have to do. Knowing didn’t make doing, any easier though.

He had to leave them. Not forever, just long enough to find a life beyond fighting. He felt so guilty about everything. Remus, Tonks, and Fred especially. If he did this he needed to be far away or his guilt would eat at him and he would devote everything for them. It was a bit selfish, but he needed to think about himself this one time. He wiped away the tears and composed himself. He had one more battle to wage. The hardest of them all. He opened the door and slipped inside.

The Great Hall was a mess. Banners, streamers and balloons littered the floor and ceiling. Scraps of food were casually tossed aside and the House-elves were going crazy trying to keep the place clean and everyone with food and drink. Harry felt sorry for them. They should be celebrating too. It was the first time that he really saw what Hermione meant. ‘SPEW huh?’ Harry thought. ‘Maybe it’s not so silly after all.’

"Oh, Harry! There you are! I've been looking all over for you!" A sickly sweet voice said to the side. He stiffened and looked over to see Rita Skitter dancing up next to him. "An Interview! I insist! The whole world will want to know the thoughts of the Boy-Who-Lived on this, his triumphant day over his parent's murderer." She didn't have her quick quotes quill, but she did have a normal one, poised and ready to jot down his every word and facial expression.

He scowled at the vile woman. "Get away from me. I have nothing to say to you. I already gave my interview."

Rita's smile turned a little evil and she clucked naughtily. "Now-now, Harry. It's not wise to upset the press. I'm sure you remember the last time you got on my bad side. I can be a great help or a great hindrance. You really should reconsider having an interview with me."

Harry's thin veneer of patience shattered and his wand was out in a heartbeat. "Don't you threaten me! I've been dirty, hungry and running for my life for a year. I've risked everything to save you and your friends. I'll not be made a fool of or put up on some altar for you to sell papers from. You try to hurt me or my friends and we'll see how much my name can hurt you back!"

Harry didn't notice that he was shouting and that the Hall had grown quiet to listen. Rita did though and was glancing around apprehensively. "Really, Harry dear! You should get some sleep. This isn't the time or place to slip back into your, shall we say...temperaments of your fifth year?"

Harry took a step forward and hesitated. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he lowered his wand and saw that she was giving a rather sly smile. Well two could play at that game. "Will someone get her out of here?" he asked loudly. "Throw her bodily if you have to."

Rita turned red. "Don't you dare!"

“Gladly,” a couple of Aurors that Harry didn’t know stepped up and took her by the arm. “Rita skitter. You are under arrest for consorting with You-Know-Who to discredit Ministry officials and to spread propaganda. Come with us.” They each took her by an arm and dragged her away. Screaming and cursing to the top of her lungs. She rose quickly and fell just as fast. It would be the last time anyone would see Rita Skitter again.

“Good riddance to that, I say.” Ron said behind him. Harry looked over with a smile at his best friend.

“Yeah,” Harry said lamely. “Let’s go over to your family.”

“Our family, Harry. You’re one of us. Like it or not.” Ron was forceful in the declaration and Harry’s heart swelled for a moment then withered down into a disgusting little thing.

“Thanks,” he said softly and gave a weak smile. Ron looked at him oddly for a moment and led the way through the crowd.

The Weasley’s were all sitting at the staff table. Looking rather subdued from the loss of Fred. Not really interested in joining in the drinks and dancing, rather just spending the time holding each other. Harry started to look at each of their faces carefully. Imprinting them into his memory. Ginny seemed to sense his coming and looked up. Their eyes locked like metal and a magnet. Harry studied every wisp of red hair and every freckle. Every dent and curve from the hollows of her eyes to her chin and neck. Regardless of the circumstance she was radiant in his eyes.

“Oh, Harry dear!” Molly said and got up from the table. She rushed around and took him into a crushing embrace. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I was so worried. So-so worried.”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Weasley. You didn’t need to worry about me.” He told her from the crushing folds of her robes.

“Nonsense. You’re like one of my sons. I have to worry about you.”

Harry relented and returned the hug as fiercely as it was given. She sensed how much it meant to him and pull away to look at his face. She leaned up and brushed his forehead with a kiss. "You and Ron. Getting so tall now," she said with misty eyes.

Harry blushed and bit and turned to the family. "Can we go someplace to talk? Someplace Private?"

The family looked at each other and began to nod at him. They all got up and started to leave when Harry felt a tug on his robes. He looked down and blinked. A little girl was looking up at him. She had on jeans and a fluffy dark green sweater. She was holding a ruffled Teddy bear in one hand and an envelope in the other. Her hair was a dark brown, just bordering on black with light curls down to her shoulders. Her eyes were large and round brimming with tears and fear. She was enchanting and pitiful. Harry was moved to the core at the sight of her.

"Yeah?" he asked the little girl since it was obvious she wanted something from him.

"Are-you Harry Potter?" she asked in a trembling little voice. The other Weasley had noticed the girl as well and had gathered behind him to listen.

Harry knelt down to her level and gave her a reassuring smile. "Yeah I am. What's your name?"

"I-I'm Lily." Harry blinked. The name was like a basin of cold water dumped over him.

"Well-Well hello, Lily. I'm pleased to meet you," he said when he looked back up at her. "What can I do for you?"

"I can't find my Papa. I looked and looked, but I can't find him." Her lower lip trembled in a pout and the tears in her eyes seemed to swell more. Harry gave an inward sigh. He hoped her dad wasn't dead. He didn't know how to tell a little girl that.



“We’ll why don’t we look for him? I’m sure he’s somewhere around here.”

Lily shook her head and sniffed. “He said he would be back and if he didn’t come back I needed to find you and give you this.” She held out the envelope.

Harry blinked and took it from her hands. “Who’s your father, Lily?”

“Papa Severus.”

Harry’s jaw dropped and he knew from the sudden stillness behind him that the rest of the Weasley’s were in a similar state of shock. Snape didn’t have a daughter. Surely someone would have known. “Err,” Harry had to ask, “A tall man. Grumpy look on his face. A beaklike nose and oily black hair?”

Lily nodded. “That’s Papa Severus, only he isn’t grumpy!”

“Oh...well, I’m sorry.” He didn’t know how to tell her that Snape was dead. That she was alone now. He opened the envelope and read the letter inside.

Potter.

With our difference notwithstanding you are now the one I turn to. I assure you that I find this alternative as uncomfortable as you do. I could go on for miles of parchment about your inadequacies and ego so I will get to the point. If you are reading this it means I am dead and you have defeated the Dark Lord. My distaste for your skill as they are, I must concede that I was impressed the past year at your work. Even with the help of your idiotic friend and that disgustingly intelligent Granger, to have survived that long against the Dark Lord was impressive. If I did not have the opportunity to reveal the truth of that night on top of the tower then go to my rooms. I have prepared a special set of memories inside my pensieve for you to look at. This time with permission. Look at those memories before reading further.

To read further. Please speak out the name of my love.

Harry took a breath. "Lily Evens." The rest of the letter appeared with flourish.

You can listen, Potter. Perhaps there is small hope for you yet. The girl in front of you is named Lily. I so named her two years ago when I adopted her. Naturally I could tell no one about this to keep her safe. The Dark Lord would not have taken kindly to my having adopted a muggle-born girl. It would have sealed my fate, and hers as well, if he had found out. I am now dead, to my eternal disgust, but you are triumphant and alive. I have fulfilled my vow to your mother, a greater woman than any other, and kept you alive.

I have sacrificed more than you can know to see you here. You owe me more than can be explained in parchment. Thus I charge you with a vow. A debt to fulfill one that will last a life-time. Lily, look after her. Why young you are and irresponsible to no end, I feel that in my absence you can provide her with what she needs. Like you she is an orphan. Twice now. You, more than anyone, can guide her through life with the loss of her parents. You more than anyone can see that she has happiness because you, more than anyone, seemed to have found it even under barrage by the Dark Lord. She is special to me. Look after her for me. Thus do I charge you.

Severus Snape

P.S. Do your best to keep Molly's insufferable coddling away from her. She will undoubtedly leave the girl as scatter brained as her children.

Harry folded up the paper with a mixture of wonder and anger. Even in death he was mean and could get to Harry. Even when giving compliments he could cut to the quick. He tucked the letter back into the enveloped and took a long look at Lily. She was a beautiful little girl. But could he do it? Did he want to? Did he have a choice? Snape was right. He had sacrificed and entire life to make sure Harry lived. He had asked only that he look after his daughter. An orphan. Like him. Harry didn't know where it came from. He wasn't even sure what it was, but he wanted to hold this little girl and do what Snape asked. Keep her safe. He suspected that maybe Snape had charmed the parchment. He didn't care if he had.

“Lily?” he finally said after a minute of studying her.

“Yeah?” she asked in that small voice.

“Come with me. I’m going to make sure your ok and taken care of.”

“What about Papa Severus?”

Harry reached out and touched her cheek. “Papa Severus isn’t coming back. I’ll explain more later, but for now I think you should get away from all this and get some food and a good night sleep.”

Lily looked down at her slipper clad feet and nodded. Harry reached out and she dutifully took his hand. He stood up and looked at the Weasley’s who had a questioning look in their eyes. He motioned towards the door of the Great Hall and they slipped out as a group, with Harry in the middle to avoid any harassment.

They made their way to an empty classroom and all took seats.

“What’s going on, Harry? Whose is the little girl?”

“One second,” he begged and taking out his wand cast a light sleeping charm on Lily. She sagged against him and he lifted her up and placed her carefully on a couch. He conjured a blanket for the girl and tucked her in.

“Awww” He heard Ginny, Molly and Hermione say behind him. He blushed a bit. He turned back to the family and hopped up on the teacher’s desk.

“She is-was, Snape's adopted daughter.”

“What?! I didn’t know he had a kid.” George said. The rest nodded agreements all very much surprised.

“No one did. He kept her secret. She’s a muggle-born orphan. If Voldemort had found out about her he would have killed her and probably Snape as well.”

"That makes sense," Molly said as an afterthought. "I remember one time back in Grimmauld place. He was asking about how people went about adopting a child. I thought it odd at the time, but didn't think much of it afterwards. That was a couple of years ago."

Harry nodded. "Bout the right time according to his letter." He didn't want to say that he was given charge of looking after the girl. Mrs. Weasley and Hermione would throw a fit and tell him he wasn't old enough. He probably wasn't in truth, but he had to. He just had to.

"Now then, we have things to talk about. I'm sorry about Fred. I don't even know what to say." He looked at George for this. The lone twin gave a silent nod and ducked his head. Molly began to sob again and Arthur took her in his arms. Harry felt so guilty. He hoped George would recover and keep the joking spirit alive.

"We have other things to discuss," he continued. "A lot of things went bad in the Wizarding World because of Voldemort. They need to be fixed. I don't think we should trust the Ministry to do the right thing. I suspect they'll just try to forget about it all and go back to the way things were. We can't let that happen. Do you all agree?"

They all nodded and Ginny crept up beside him on the desk. She looped an arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder. He looked stunned for a moment, but then relaxed. He would enjoy it while it lasted. Molly looked at the scene approvingly once she had composed herself.

"What do you want us to do Harry? We're ready." Bill said with Fleur standing next to him, holding his hand. Harry felt grateful for the trust and a little unnerved by the look that Bill directed to him. It was almost hero worship. From a man over ten years older than Harry. He didn't like that one bit.

"The Ministry needs real unity. Not just between Pure-bloods and Muggleborns, but between all magical creatures. Elves and Goblins and Centaurs and Merfolk. They all should have a say and a part of the world. It's wrong to see them as third class creatures. They should be equal citizens. Hermione, Ron. Work on SPEW. You'll have people who will listen to you now. Push until the elves are given

freedom and citizenship. Many of them died fighting with us. We should honor them.”

“Right. We’re on it.” Ron said with determination and preamble. Hermione looked up at him with wonder and love. Like in the Room of Requirement she hesitated for a but a moment and then threw her arms around him for a crushing kiss. When they came up for air she ducked her head in a blush at the cherishing look Molly gave her.

“Arthur, I need you to work with the Ministry and the muggle-borns. I suspect there might be a rebellion brewing from the muggleborns if the Ministry doesn’t work quickly to right things. A lot of families were torn apart and tortured over the past year. We need to make everyone see that its magic that binds us. Not blood.”

“Wisely said, Harry,” Arthur told him. “I’ll get together with Kingsley and we’ll start working on it immediately.”

“Good. Charlie, you should work with the Centaurs. They respect strength. After handling dragons some grumpy Centaurs should be easy.” Charlie thought it over for a moment and gave a nod.

“George, the world is going to need you most of all. Don’t lose those laughs. Work with the Ministry Department of Commerce. Help them get Diagon Ally up and running again. You’re brilliant with things like that. You really know how to make things cheerful again. Use that. Make the Ally an even more wondrous place to go to than ever before. It’s a place of magic. Have it proclaimed from every shop.”

“I think I can do that. I’m still saint-like after all.” A smile broke through his gloom and he looked over towards Fred, to find him not at his side. The smile faded and he looked down. It would be a long and up-hill battle for him.

“Mrs. Weasley, Ginny. I have something really special I need for you to do.”

“What’s that, Harry?” Ginny asked softly from beside him.

“Orphans. There are probably a lot of them out there now. And probably a lot of muggle-born orphans as well stuck without a family. Find them. Help them. Bring them into the Wizarding world. Make sure they find a family.”

Molly gapped for a moment and then walked slowly over to Harry. Gently she leaned down and kissed his forehead. “That’s the most compassionate thing I’ve ever heard you say, Harry. I’m not sure I know what to do, but I’ll find a way. You’re right. Everyone needs a family.”

“Right, that’s settled then.” Harry said with finality. Hermione and Ron were looking at him through narrowed eyes. They knew he was up to something and they didn’t like what they suspected. Harry felt Ginny’s eyes on him as well as she felt the tension in his body. He didn’t look down at her though. He couldn’t; not yet.

“If you don’t mind I’d like to talk to Ron, Hermione and Ginny alone please,” he asked politely.

“Of course, Harry.” Molly said gently. “We’ll be back at the Burrow. The floo’s were all opened up. I don’t really want to stay here anymore.”

“I understand, Mrs. Weasley. I won’t keep them long.”

The rest of the family filed out and left the four of them alone.

“What’s going on, Harry,” Hermione said with suspicion. “I don’t like the look you have now.”

Harry gathered his breath and courage. “I’m going away.” He felt Ginny tighten her grip around his arm. Painfully tight.

“Going away?” her sweet voice was rising slowly with panic. “What do you mean? For how long? A week or two?”

Harry slowly shook his head. “I don’t know for how long, but it won’t be for a week or two.”

His eyes met Hermione's and Ron's. Hermione's were rebellious, but Ron's were curiously accepting.

"Now, Harry-" Hermione began, but was stopped but Ron's raised hand.

"I know what you're doing, Mate. I know why you need to do it. I don't like it, but I won't stop you."

"Ron!" Hermione said viciously, "What are you talking about! He can't just up and leave! He said it himself: we have to rebuild the Wizarding World. The Ministry, Hogwarts. Everything! He can't dump that on all of us and then go on some trip! He has responsibilities!"

"To some people more than others." Ginny said flatly and he risked a sad look down at her. She was furious and scared, but she wasn't crying. He always loved that about her.

"Yeah. Responsibilities..." He began and broke off. He pulled away from Ginny and walked over to an open window. The serene afternoon belittled the war that had occurred just hours before. The only testament was the holes and bodies that were even now being dragged away. "I've had my fill of responsibility for a time. Everyone looking at me to fix this problem or that problem. I've had my fill of running for my life. Of not knowing if I'll be dead tomorrow. Of actually expecting it."

He turned back to the three who were quietly crowded next to each other. "For the first time I actually have a future to look forward to. A life I can build. But I can't do that here. Something would keep coming up. If I was around I'd never be left alone. I'd kinda like to see the world as a regular person and not as the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Is that what you're going to do, Harry? See the world?" Ginny asked. Her face set into disapproval. "We can do that. All of us. We can take a long trip and see everything. Travel everywhere. You don't need to leave us to do that."

He shook his head. "I'd feel too guilty around you all. You may not have known it, but for years my life has been around all of you."

Everything good revolved around you all. My life was inseparable from you. I liked that, but now...schools over. The war is over. I have to begin again. For the first time really. Dumbledore told me that if I really wanted to start a life that I had to live. That's what I plan to do. I can't do that around here. I can't be the person you all want me to be until I have the change to live like a regular bloke."

They were silent as they digested his words. A moment later Ron gave a reluctant nod. "I understand, Mate. Like I said I won't stop you. Don't stay away too long though. Stop by and see me before you go. You know where."

Harry met his eyes for a long time and nodded. Ron turned and walked out leaving just a shell shocked Hermione and an angry red headed girl.

"Well, he, may understand, but I certainly don't Harry James Potter!" Hermione was ready and willing to work into one of her famous tantrums of logic. He saw that she felt betrayed by Ron's willingness to let him go. "We fought beside you. We almost died for you. I sent my parents away for you. How can you just forget all that and leave?"

"Don't you see?!" Harry said hotly. "No one should do that 'for' me! You should have done all that for yourself! I thought you did! That's the thing of it, isn't it? If I stay everyone will do things for me and me for them! For once in my life I have to do something for myself. To build up something of my own and not for someone else. I'm tired of trying to be strong for other people. Can't you understand?"

"NO!" Hermione screamed, now crying. "We were always together! Harry! You were my first friend! I never had friends in the muggle world! You were my first real friend! How can you ask me to just let that go?"

Harry felt awful. He didn't know that. She never talked about life before Hogwarts much. He guessed she was kind of lonely but never like that. "It won't be for good Hermione." He promised. Only for a year or so. Maybe two. Can't I have that?"



“But it won’t be for just a year or two! These things always go on and on! You’ll go away and we won’t ever see you again except for maybe some visit ten years down the road! I know it! I just do!”

Harry walked over. Ginny was being suspiciously silent. He suspected she was going to talk to him alone. He owed her that. For the time being he needed to make Hermione see. “Hermione, I promise I won’t stay away forever. And when I come back it’ll be for good. I’m not giving you up for a new life. I just want a life of my own that, when I come back. I can share with you. Please let me do this. Please?”

Hermione looked at him for a long moment and absently wiped away her tears. She really did look awful. She needed a bath and sleep like the rest of them did. “You promise? You won’t stay away for long? You’ll come back!”

Harry nodded. “I promise.”

Hermione gave a little hiccup of a laugh. “You better, Harry Potter. Or I’ll find some spell to track you down. Mark my words. I’ll find you and drag you back.”

Harry grinned and pulled her into a tight hug. “I don’t doubt it.” She returned the embrace and they stood there for a moment. Then she pulled away and stood on her tip toes and planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Good-bye,” she whispered in his ear and walked out the room, stopping once more to studied his face, before disappearing from sight.

Harry slowly turned towards the one person he was dreading leaving most of all. Ginny.

“Hi,” he said softly. She didn’t say anything. Just stared at him hard.

“So you’re going to leave? Just like that? I thought...you made it sound like...what about ‘us’? The way you talked...like we would be together when it was all over. Were you just trying to make me feel better? Did you enjoy hoping I would pine for you again? Cause I

won't Harry Potter. I won't pine for you like a silly girl again. I just wont." she didn't sound like she believed herself though.

"I-I don't expect you to. What I said back then. I wanted it. I want you. I want you so bad it's killing me to go-"

"Then don't"

"I have to. You heard what I said."

Ginny gnawed her lip. "Then take me with you. I don't need to finish Hogwarts. I'll go anywhere you go."

Harry closed his eyes. It was so tempting. The forbidden fruit. He had thought of that himself. "It won't work, Gin. I don't...I don't feel right inside. Like something is missing-"

"What's missing is me!"

"No. What's missing is myself. Who I am. I've got you in here already. But if I don't...heal. I'll never be the kind of man you deserve. I'd like nothing better for my whole world to be around you. That wouldn't be good for either of us though. We have to have our own worlds."

They looked at each other for a long time. Ginny gnawing on her lip and Harry shuffling his feet. "I can't wait forever, Harry. I-I'll wait for a little bit, but not forever. I want a life too you know."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I know. I wouldn't want you to. Well I would, but, well...Oh blast it!" He pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers for a kiss. She resisted at first, but eventually sighed and opened her mouth. His hands slipped up to tangle in her hair and around her waist as hers slid around his neck. She gave a low moan from deep within her throat that sent tremors through him. For what seemed like hours they kissed. Their lips tasting each other. Their hands clinging and exploring. Finally he pulled away. It was only maybe a minute, but it seemed like a lifetime was shared in that kiss.

"I care you for, Ginny. So much that, well, it kills me to leave. But I have to."

Ginny gave a nod, but refused to cry. He could tell that she wanted to, but didn't. It gave him hope. Her strength in his leaving gave him some as well. He reached out and traced her jaw, but she stepped away quickly.

"I-I should go. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep myself from stopping you."

Harry drank in her face and her body. He would memorize everything about her and when he went to sleep at night it would be to her face. He made a silent vow. No matter what, he wouldn't be with any girl but her. Even if he had to wait forever. He gave a nod. She blinked her eyes rapidly and turned to run out of the room. He thought he heard a choked sob as she turned the corner.

He stared at the empty space for a moment and then turned to the couch. He walked over and raised his wand, "Enervate," and little Lily woke up. She blinked her eyes and looked around in bewilderment. He saw Harry and tucked her Teddy closer to her body and snuggled some more under the blanket he had given her.

"Good morning," he said with a smile.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked worriedly.

Harry gave a nod. "You looked like you needed some, so I gave you a little push."

"Oh...what's going to happen to me?" He could see the stark fear in her pretty brown eyes when she asked this. He reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Well. I knew Snape."

"Who?"

"Papa Severus. I knew him. He was one of my teachers. That letter you gave me?" She nodded. "That letter told me that I should take care of you. That's up to you though. Do you have any other family

anywhere?" She shook her head. "Then would you like that? To stay with me? I don't know much about little girls, but well. I'd be willing to learn, if you'd give me a chance."

She gave a little shrug. "I guess so..."

Harry pointed towards the teddy bear. "Who's that?"

Lily pulled the stuffed animal tighter against her. "That's Abigail. She my friend."

Harry gave another smile. "She looked like a good friend. Tell you what. She can come with us and look out for you. If I do something you don't like, she can tell me and I'll stop, ok?"

"How do I know you won't leave like Papa Severus?" Her voice was tiny.

Harry took one her hands. "Because all the bad things that made him leave are over. The bad people are gone. The fighting's stopped. I won't leave unless you want me to. Do you want me to?"

The little girl hesitated and then shook her head. "No. I like you. You're nice. I don't want you to leave."

"Then I won't. I promise. So, what do you say? I'm going to travel the world. Want to come with me?"

Her eyes grew round like saucers. "The whole world?"

Harry nodded. "Yup!"

"But it's so big!"

Harry laughed and ruffled her hair. "That's why I want to see it. You're welcome to come along." Lily just nodded her head dumbly. He grinned and pulled the blanket away. "Then let's go. We have a lot to do."

She hopped down off the couch and picked up the blanket with the other hand. She took Harry's hand and held Abigail and the blanket in the other. The conjured item dragging behind her as they walked out of the room. Harry stopped by the Quidditch pitch when they got outside. Ron was leaning against the door to the changing rooms. He told Lily to sit in the stands and he would be right back.

Ron met Harry's eyes and raised his brows. "The girl?" he asked.

Harry gave a bashful shrug. "It was Snape's last request."

Ron's eyes rose higher. "Blimey. The git really knows how to throw a sucker doesn't he?"

Harry gave a laugh and a nod. "He sure does. It's ok. She's an orphan like me. I think we can help each other."

Ron gave a nod and blew out a breath. "Where are you going first? Do you need anything?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm going to rent a room and the Leakey Cauldron I need a good long bath and some sleep. Then I'm going to buy some things. I'm not just going to rush off. I'll spend a few days getting ready."

Ron gave a satisfied nod. "Good to hear. Hermione really rubs off doesn't she?"

Harry laughed. "She sure does...I'm going to miss her Ron. Take good care of her would you? Both of them?"

Ron gave a serious nod. "I promise. Do you want me to beat off any guys that come calling? I'd be happy to."

Harry gave a guilty flush. He hated to do this. "Just for a little while. She'll know what you're doing and she'll hate it, but appreciate it. She'll let you know if I've waited too long to come back and she wants to move on."

“Yeah. I figured that too. Well then. Think you can send me a card every now and then? Just a quick update so I know you’re alive?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “You can’t tell anyone though. Hermione will probably be able to trace me somehow through my handwriting or some weird spell and show up at my doorstep.”

Ron whistled. “You’re asking a lot, Mate. She tends to ferret little things like that out easily.”

“I know, but I need this and you know I do.”

“Yeah...look, Mate. Seriously, don’t take too long with this. I’m going to miss you too.”

Harry smiled. “You always understand me Ron. I won’t be long.”

“Well that’s what best mates are for.”

“And you’re the best of the best.”

Ron flushed and scratched at his head. “Ah, don’t go getting all mushy on me. Guys aren’t like that.”

Harry gave a hearty laugh and stuck out his hand. Ron took it in a firm grip. “I’ll sneak some of Hermione’s books on survival and stuff. Send them to you tomorrow or something.”

“No need. I’m not going to camp out like we did all this year. Its hotels for me. Warm beds and lots of food.”

Ron grinned. “That sounds great. A could use a bath and a good meal myself. So this is good-bye, then?”

“For now.”

“I know mom still has a lot of your stuff, like your broom. I’ll get those and send them over if you don’t want the books.”

“Yeah. That’d be great...I should go, Lily’s waiting on me.”

“Bye, Harry. Be careful.”

“I will,” they shook hands again and Harry left the changing room. He spotted Lily sitting on one of the benches, swinging her legs back and forth. He motioned her over and she hopped down, her little feet pattering as she ran over to him. Her hand immediately found his and he marveled at the size and warmth. ‘Was I ever this small?’ he thought.

Together they walked towards the massive gates of Hogwarts, torn and unhinged from their placements. Four Aurors stood guard and saluted in awe as Harry walked past with the little girl.

“Mr. Harry, sir?” Lily asked when they were past the guards.

“You can just call me, Harry. What is it?”

“Why were those men saluting you?”

“They thought I was someone else.”

“Oh...” he hesitated and then opened up both her arms. He looked down and gave a laugh. He leaned over and picked her up. She settled her skinny hands around his neck and to his amazement kissed him on the cheek. He felt something warm flood into him. That little hole that he told Ginny he had; well it filled a little. Enough to give him hope.

“Are you ready? I’m going to disappear. It’s a little odd at first.”

Lily gave a little nod. “I’ve done it before with Papa Severus. What are we going to do?” she asked in a hush but excited voice.

Harry grinned at her. “We’re going to live, Lily. Live, like no one else before!”

With a twist they vanished with a loud ‘pop’ and Harry Potter was gone.

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A/N - If you are an old reader then I hope you enjoy this new version more. Too many people said the first one was too flakey. This was much more suitable I am told.



## Chapter 1

### Seven Years

Hermione sighed and stretched as she got up from her desk. She rubbed her sleep deprived eyes and waved her wand lazily conjuring a cup of tea. Daintily picking it up, she walked to the window of her office and stared out into the warm summer day. As she sipped her Earl Grey her chocolate eyes followed the flight paths of several owls, sailing towards the castle with messages tied to their legs. She watched one swoop through a Quidditch hoop in its graceful flight and murmured a soft "Score," and broke her gaze away to look at the green pastures of the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In a one weeks time the school year would start and it would be her third year as Transfiguration Professor at the school. The first two years had been hectic and stressful. She was one of the youngest teachers ever admitted to the school, but although she had her doubts Headmistress McGonagall insisted that her students were faring admirably and that she was more than worthy of the position. Still, Hermione thought that the elderly woman might indeed be off her rocker a tad bit and hired her on due to the soft spot each woman had for each other.

After graduating with more N.E. than any student since Albus Dumbledore, Hermione spent several months with Ron searching for her parents in Australia then, once returning their memories and coming back to England, she was practically forced into a position in the Department of Mysteries. She spent four wonderful years there practicing and learning the most obscure and powerful magic the Ministry had at its disposal, which was very considerable indeed. She had helped to rebuild the Ministry stock of Time Turners and also helped to build the Map of Atlas, which had forever set her name in stone in the chronicles of magic. The map covered all of England and whenever an illegal spell was cast it would show what the spell was and it's location. There were of course ways around it, but with the map and the new batch of Aurors, including her husband Ron Weasley, crime had dropped considerably in the Wizarding World and she was awarded the Order of Merlin First Class for the second time. The first being for her work with Harry Potter in defeating Volemort seven years earlier. After devouring everything being an

Unspeakable offered she gracefully resigned to do her own studies and experiments, much to the dismay of the Ministry, who offered her boundless sums of money and perks, in order to keep her on, which she respectfully declined.

She was happily unemployed for close to two months when Minerva showed up and manipulated her into taking a teaching job. Thankfully Hermione agreed and that how they say was that.

Still she had enjoyed a long summer vacation with the love of her life and husband in Egypt; and had arrived back at the school far too close to the start of term, and was working late into the night preparing for the new term. She still had to order more supplies, set out lesson plans, and hire on several more house-elves, after a batch of them decided to take a vacation and never returned.

She shook her head ruefully at that thought. Freeing the house-elves was, in her opinion, the greatest single thing to come out of the war. However, after the Ministry removed the compulsion charms from the creatures it took three long years to get them used to freedom. Their identity and their culture was finally just beginning to flesh out a bit and lean towards stability. Many of them still had trouble understanding vacations and pay and things like that. So sometimes when they took vacations they thought it meant that they could no longer work and just vanished towards some other job.

It was frustrating in the extreme, but worth it in her opinion. Hopefully one day, they would be a thriving culture and contribute greatly to the Wizarding World. The Centaurs took to their new rights and positions offered them with relish and it mended, almost overnight, most of the gulf between them and wizards. Many of their best Seers now worked with the Department of Mysteries, flushing out many useless prophecies and teaching the correct way to divine certain aspects of the future. Although still looked at askance, even Hermione now had to give grudging respect to that long ridiculed branch of magic.

The goblins however, were another problem entirely. When word reached their rather long ears that the Ministry was in quiet talks to allow them access to wand lore and full rights in the Wizarding world they jumped on it with abandon. They pooled their full and very

considerable financial resources towards the Ministry to push it through, and the Ministry, of course, balked in fear at the aggressive moves of the goblins and for four years The Ministry and the Goblins fought in the political halls using some of the most underhanded and vicious tactics short of murder. Then suddenly one day the Ministry reversed its position out of the blue. The Goblins were threatening to go to war and were mobilizing. And the Ministry frantically began to train their Aurors and was rising to the challenge. Then literally in one night the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebot and most of the Wizenmagot did a complete 180 and passed the law granting wand lore, wand use and positions among the Ministry and the Wizenmagot to the Goblins.

The goblins in turn de-armed, released the funds of Gringotts, and pretended the whole affair never happened and were as friendly as could be. Still many looked at them with distrust thinking that the goblins did something to blackmail the Ministry into submitting. Even Hermione with her considerable contacts and influence could not find out how the potential war was averted. Kingsley merely gave her a sly smile, a wink, a pat on the shoulder and never uttered a word.

The Goblins had to agree however, that they would train in Hogwarts, allow themselves to be sorted and would not open secret schools of wand magic just for goblins. The goblins hated that with a passion but for yet another unknown reason they agreed and this coming year would be the first year that goblins would attend Hogwarts. She did not relish it at all and she, with most of the staff, almost resigned on the spot when they heard about it. Only Minerva's considerable influence, and in memory to Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter's wishes, kept them on.

Harry Potter. Hermione didn't think about him too much anymore. She had known him for seven years and hadn't seen or heard from him in seven more. She gave a fond smile as the memory of his infectious smile and those seductive emerald eyes floated from the dim recesses of her past. She took a sip of her tea with that fond smile still planted on her face. She mulled in her thoughts for a few moments longer wondering how her best friend was doing before returning to her desk and plunging back into work.

She sat taking notes for her coming term lesson plans when the hearth flared to a dazzling green and she saw Ron's head peek through.

"Hey Love!" he said grinning widely, his hair swept back from a day of playing Quidditch with a local team. With his Auror duties he could not play professionally. However, most of the teams wanted him and badgered him constantly to take a contract. He wanted to, but planned to stay at the Ministry for two more years; just until the newest batch of recruits were fully trained, thus returning the Ministry to full strength as it was before the second rise of Voldemort. Then, he hoped, he could sign on with the Chudley Cannons and live his dream.

"Hello Dear," she replied. Giving him that smile that she saved just for him. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" she asked.

"You owe it to the fact that I haven't seen you in three days and your side of the bed, and my arms, has been very empty and cold!" he scowled playfully. Hermione giggled. Ron was always the only one who could get her to do that.

"If you say so Ronald. I just think you want me to whip you up some large outlandish meal to stuff that cavern you call a stomach!" she retorted with a wistful smile.

"It's not a cavern! More like a gorge! Seriously though," his face grew solemn. "I miss you. When are you coming home? Rose has been frantic to see you and asks about you constantly. Can't you take a break and spend a day at home?"

Hermione bit her lip and mulled things over. She looked at her task sheet and grudgingly came to the conclusion, that she had caught up on a lot of work and could afford a small break to spend time with her husband and daughter. She looked back towards the hearth to see Ron's concerned and anxious face. She gave a small nod.

"Ok I can afford to take a break for a day, but only a day then I have to see about possible boarding for the influx of the new goblin students."

At the mention of the goblin students Ron scowled, but wisely kept his mouth shut for fear of yet another row with his wife on the tender subject. Instead he straitened his face and gave her a beautifully false smile.

“Great! Come on over. Mum sent over a picnic basket so we can head to the pond by the burrow and take a swim.” Without waiting for a reply he ducked back and the hearth gate closed. Hermione gave a chuckle and tucked away some of her folders and notes, for later use, and stood up. She scribbled a quick note to Minerva in case she was needed and tied her thick, bushy hair back. She threw in some flew powder and said in a firm voice,

“Number 3, Old Meadows Way,” and stepped through.

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The wind buffeted the players face. Hair was flown back as they pressed forward on their broom pushing forth with all the speed they could. A shout from their team mate let the person know a bludger was incoming. With a quick roll they moved to the other side of the defending player and smirked as they heard the tell tale ‘crunch’ of the incoming bludger hitting. Two of the opposing team’s chasers moved to intercept and time seemed to slow down. The cheer of the crowd faded away, and it was only the wind and the steady beats of a heart. They tried to flank the player, to drive them into the ground or a goal post.

With a growl the star Quidditch player took a big risk. They hurled the quaffle at one of the opposing chaser’s head. It paid off as the Quaffle struck them in the temple. They star moved quickly through the air with a deft twist of the broom and caught the wild Quaffle. With a clear path the player pour every ounce of speed they could and shot towards the goal posts. As the distance closed, they recklessly tried to turn the broom left and held the arm holding the quaffle out to the right. The force of the speed and the high turn allowed the star to fling the quaffle with the momentum and speed of the broom rather than

their arm. With great speed the hard round ball rocketed towards the right most post. Thankfully, the Keeper, seeing the player bank left, moved towards that hoop and wasn't in line to defend as the ball sailed though the undefended goal.

"WEASELY SCORES!" The announcer yelled and the sounds of the stadium returned to the red head's ears. "Harpies 320 – Bulgaria 260! Another Brilliant play by Weasley gives the all woman's team a sixty point lead!"

Ginevra Weasley grinned in triumph as her team mates flew around her, and together they soared in a victory pass over the stands while waiting for the Quaffle to be recovered.

"Wait a minute the seekers are onto the snitch! And off they go!" Ginny gasped and turned around in dread. 'Oh no! It's too soon!' she thought. Krum was still one of the best in the league, rivaled only by the new seeker of the Wimbourne Wasps. The only way they could win was by racking up enough points before Krum could grab it, but the Bulgaria chasers were doing a good job of keeping the score to close. Ginny watched in horror as Krum dodged the bludgers fired at him and knocked her seekers hand away to swipe up the tiny golden snitch. She almost cried as the announcer declared a Victory to Bulgaria. It was the third loss in a row by the Harpies, officially putting them out of the running for the World Cup, unless some miracle happened and they won the rest of their games by four hundred or more points, which wasn't likely. The worst was losing to the Cannons. Something that Ron had been gloating over for two months.

With heavy hearts the rest of the Harpies team flew down to the pitch and shook hands with the Bulgaria team. As they made their way to the lockers the other girls were all trying to whisper reassurances to each other that they each did their best. Which they did. The competition this year was just too fierce and they just couldn't pull off their strategies.

In Ginny's opinion that is where the fault lay. Their new couch. She was a pompous bitter woman, who reminded Ginny of a slim and athletic Umbridge. The woman refused to work with the strengths of the team, and instead tried to mold the team to her needs. Ginny felt

that, although the strategies they had were top notch and wonderful, they just couldn't be pulled off with the current team. Ginny had a small inkling that Couch Newburg knew this and was going to try and dump some of the members for some favors to get friends on the team. She didn't have any proof though, and it likely wouldn't have done any good if she did.

As the team all but ignored Newburg's criticism, they all secretly agreed with her, Ginny waved her wand in a cleansing charm that would serve until she could take a shower later in the privacy of her flat. The team broke off and they wandered one by one out of the stadium towards the private apparation grounds reserved for the players.

Once outside the team was, of course, bombarded by fans, mostly females, since it was an all female team, but a lot of young men trying to garner the attention of the players in hopes of a date and a snog. Ginny and the other players studiously ignored such men, but they stuck around anyways and hounded the girls, much to their chagrin and amusement.

A young girl, who was waving a picture of Ginny frantically in the air, caught her eye. She must have been around twelve or so with long smooth dark hair and a slight tan. She was very pretty with an eager and excited face. Ginny relented and walked over to take the picture from the young girl's hand.

"Hi there!" Ginny said with a smile. The girl's eyes gleamed with joy and blushed brightly at being addressed. "Who should I make this out to?"

The girl stammered a bit while trying to collect her voice and composure. "To Lily please!" she finally said. Ginny smiled pleasantly.

"Then Lily it is." She took out a never-dip quill and started to write. "I've always had a fond love of that name. It's a very special name do you know that?" The young girl shook her head in denial and watched as Ginny finished up the autograph, and handed back the picture. Lily took the picture and clutched it to her chest.

"Oh thank you! My friends are never going to believe this!" The dark haired beauty exclaimed. With a wave she ran off into the crowd and Ginny gave a chuckle and a rueful shake of the head. Ignoring the rest of the clamoring crowd, only stopping twice more, for an autograph and a picture taken with a young girl. Finally Ginny arrived at the site and with a twist of her body she apparated back to her flat in Bath.

With a grateful sigh she dropped her gear on the ground and headed towards the shower. As she stood languidly under the hot steamy water she heard a voice yelling for her. She ducked her head out of the shower curtain and listened for a moment recognizing the voice of her brother Ron. She sighed and turned off the water, screaming out that she was coming. She cast a quick drying spell on her hair, pulled on a lovely thick wool robe that she loved, and made her way to the hearth while brushing out her long red hair.

"What is it Ron?" She said in exasperation.

"How did the game go?"

"We lost!" She snapped at him. "Bloody Newburg and her bloody strategies cost us the game. She refused to let the beaters focus on their chasers and had them uselessly attacking Krum. We couldn't get enough of a lead." She scowled, her good mood from the shower vanished.

Ron winced and offered a sympathetic smile. "That's why you should try and get the Cannons to take up your contract! They would be delighted to have you. And in two years I might be able to get on the team and we could go gold!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. Ron had been pressuring her towards the Cannons for close to four years; ever since she first decided to try out for professional Quidditch. She hated the Cannons however, and gave up long ago trying to argue with him.

"I was in the shower Ron. What do you want?"



“Well, me, Hermione, and Rose are going to go for a swim at the pond. I wanted to know if you and Eric wanted to come. Mum made us a picnic to take.”

Ginny thought it over. It had been a couple of weeks since she had spent any time with them and gave a nod. “Ok. I’ll give him a call and see if he wants to come. I’ll meet you there in a bit.”

“Great!” Ron replied with a wide grin and his face faded away. Ginny took up her own floo powder a second later and threw it into the hearth calling out her boyfriend’s address and stuck her head in.

“Eric?” She called out through the living room of his spacious home. A moment later her boyfriend appeared with a book tucked under his arm.

“Hey Gin.” He said in that deep baritone voice of his. She took a moment to admire him. His dusky skin and trimmed black beard, long hair that fell to his wide shoulders. He was wearing tan pants and a tight white tea shirt.

“You almost ready?” He asked. They had planned to go to lunch after she had her game.

“Actually sweetie, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind coming to the pond by my parent’s home with Ron and Hermione instead.” She saw him wince and look at her in trepidation.

“Ron? Why does it have to be the idiot brother?” He asked. Ginny glared back.

“He is not an idiot. He is just protective.”

“Ginny. He thought an Obfuscation Rod was some kind of sex toy I was going to use on you. He had your mom sending me howlers demanding I stop dating you.” He folded his arms and stared right back. Ginny had to wince at that memory a couple months back. She shyly tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Well that could be an innocent mistake.” She said in a small pleading voice.

“Yeah, I guess that could be considered a mistake. So was trying to conjure a simple chair. I ended up with a cougar chasing me across the lawn till his wife could banish it.” He raised a brow when Ginny sighed.

“Ok, so maybe he isn’t the most studious wizard. Remember though, he is an Auror, and you don’t get in by being an idiot.” He gave a shrug as if it didn’t matter to him.

“Please? I haven’t seen them in awhile. I’ll give you a nice reward later!” She gave a sly seductive smile causing the man to perk up a bit.

“Well. I guess I could make an appearance if it will make you happy. Move over and let me come on through.” She beamed her famous smile at him and moved aside in the fireplace so that the gateway didn’t close and he squeezed through into her flat. She pulled her head out and dusted herself and Eric off. Pausing a bit with her hand on his broad chest and reaching up on the tips of her toes to give him a soft kiss on his rough lips. He gave a small smile and tugged on her bangs like he usually did.

“Ok! Get your things ready and let’s go.” Ginny gave a slight squeal when he pinched her bum and hurried into her bedroom to change. A few minutes later she walked out in a pale yellow sun dress and a wide brimmed hat with a book tucked under her arm. Holding out her arm to him she winked.

“Ready for another adventure?” She asked with a playful look in her eye. Eric sighed again and took her arm.

“I guess.”

And away they went.

## Chapter 2

### A Day in the Life

"I swear Ronald Weasley, if you do anything to that poor man again, you will be sleeping outside for a month!" Hermione warned in a low growl as she and Ron watched Ginny and her boyfriend Eric walk across the high grass to the large pond that was about half a mile from the Burrow. Ron winced at her warning and looked at his wife innocently.

"They were all accidents I swear! I like this chap. He doesn't talk much." He said it so matter of fact that Hermione almost believed him, almost.

"Well just so you remember, and behave. He could end up being your brother in law." She smirked as she saw Ron's face pale.

"Oh bloody hell." he whispered but couldn't say anything more as Ginny and Eric had arrived. "Hey Sis!" he said instead and smiled. "Eric." He gave a polite nod, which the tall brooding man returned.

"Hello Ron." Ginny said tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and smoothing down a very pretty pale yellow sundress. "Thanks for inviting us. Hi Hermione." The two girls embraced and kissed each other on the cheek.

"Hi Gin. I love that outfit." Hermione said with a wistful sigh. Ginny gave a small smile at the compliment.

"Thanks. It's one of my favorite. So where is my niece?" she asked, looking around for the rambunctious little four year old.

"She is chasing frogs around the pond." Hermione replied pointing to a small spec of red in the distance of the tall grass. "She heard the story of prince charming and is looking for a frog to kiss. I told her it was untrue and disgusting, but she has it stuck in her head that if she kisses a frog she will get a brother or something. I am not sure even she knows what she wants." Hermione shook her head in confusion and took a seat on the large checkered flannel blanket that had been

spread out on the ankle length grass. The rest of the group joined her a moment later.

“Ron said the game went badly.”

The red head scoffed, as if that were the understatement of the year. “You could say that. If Couch Newburg would let our Keeper play to her own style rather than some obscure method then she could have stopped enough goals, that we would have been far enough over Bulgaria to take Krum out of the equation. But no, we lost thanks to that inbred swine’s bloody ideas about the next evolution of Quidditch.”

Eric draped an arm around Ginny’s shoulders and gave a comforting hug. The red head rested against his body and shoulder after a moment, and summoned an apple from the large basket in the center.

“Don’t get so worked up over it Ginevra.” Her brooding boyfriend told her sternly. “It is only a game.” Hermione and Ron both held their breath, expecting a round of hexing to happen after that statement. Whenever anyone tried to tell Ginny that, she would go ballistic and throw hexes left and right, stating to the top of her lungs that ‘It’s more than a game. It’s a lifestyle.’ To their surprise though, she smiled and gave a nod and kissed the hand that was wrapped around her shoulder. Ron frowned a bit and peered suspiciously at his little sister.

“All right. Who the bloody hell are you?” he said simply. Ginny blinked at him a couple of times and turned to Hermione, who was busy looking for something to hit her husband with.

“I’m just me Ron, but Eric has made me realize that, although I can make a living off of Quidditch, I shouldn’t live it. So I’ve been working on not getting too worked up over such things.” She winked at her brother.

“Uh huh.” He didn’t look for one second like he believed her. Eric spoke up at this point to defend her.

"Ginevra and I discussed in length her career and plans. She won't be playing the silly game forever and while amusing is not the sort of job for a mother to have. When she starts a family she will quit the game and turn to a more sensible career."

Ron saw it now. The tightness of the eyes, the false smile, the hand balled into a tight fist. Eric was about two steps from getting punched and turned into some unnamed sludge for the remainder of the day. Hermione hastily intervened by throwing sandwiches at the three of them and changing the subject.

"So Eric. How is your company going?" The big man gave a shrug.

"It moves like always. We are currently working a deal to handle all outgoing broomsticks to the States. If we pull it off we should see a 10 to 15 increase in profit over the following year."

Ron nodded through the explanation like he actually cared, and saw that Ginny was still upset. As Eric and Hermione started to get involved in a debate on business, and monetary concerns, he motioned with his head towards Ginny. She met his eyes and nodded.

"Me and Ginny are going to go see how Rose is doing with her hunt." Ron said standing up. The two nodded absently and continued their talk. Ron helped Ginny to her feet and the two walked away, their toes dragging through the cool grass.

"You ok there Sis?"

"Yes."

"You don't look it. You look like you're about to start a war." he observed patiently. Ginny sighed and adjusted the wide brim hat on her head.

"Oh Ron. He just doesn't understand about my career or who I am. He wants me to be the perfect lady. Dainty, and polite, and reserved, and I just can't be like that for him. I'm trying, but it's so hard."

Ron took his sisters hand and gave her a squeeze of reassurance. "Then why are you still with him? If he won't settle for who you are, why even bother?"

"Oh Ron it's not that easy. Too many guys just want to date me cause I am a star Quidditch player, or for my money. Eric is the first guy to not know who I am, or care about my money. I don't want to end up single for another couple years. I figure if I can change a little bit to make him happy then it's a worthy sacrifice to not being lonely anymore."

"Wow Gin. You really thought this through." She nodded. "But where will the changes and sacrifices stop?" She looked to her brother a little startled.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just saying that Eric seems the kind of man to want to control everyone around him. The family makes him uncomfortable because we are all so independent. If you become some flower with thorns for him to admire what's next? Will he make you trim your thorns off? He is already pushing for you to stop playing Quidditch."

"No he is not!" Ginny protested.

"Gin. I see it all the time in the Auror office. We use the same tactics on criminals. He pushes you to see one of his points. Then urges you to another. Then he explains that one more thing, is just a little thing, and you think 'what can this one thing hurt'. You get to the point where you are giving up so much just to keep the guy happy that you give up who and what you are. Gin if you give in to him then one day your going to be a grey haired and bitter house wife with no time left for your own dreams."

He had taken her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes while he delivered this statement. Ginny looked on with wide eye and a gaping mouth trying to organize the thoughts in her head.

"It isn't like that Ron." she replied quietly. "He doesn't want to change me like that. He just wants me to keep my future options in perspective."

"Oh come on Gin. You heard him back there. You guys have been seeing each other for five months-"

"Six."

"Six months and he already has your entire bloody life planned out for you. I wouldn't be surprised if he has a checklist for you hidden in his office or something. Harry would never even think of asking you to not do something you want!"

Ron knew instantly that was a mistake, as Ginny face set, and her eyes lit with their own inner fire. Her lips set into a snarl and she balled her fists at her sides.

"I don't give a damn what Harry Bloody Potter would or would not do with me." She hissed with malice. "He left us a long time ago, and you bloody well need to stop comparing every guy I date, with Harry Bloody Potter. He is dead for all I am concerned!"

She turned away and walked swiftly towards Rose, who was busy splashing in a puddle after a toad and laughing like most children when they get wet and dirty. Ron watched her sadly for a moment and turned back towards the picnic area.

Thirty minutes later the five of them were laying down comfortably on the blanket and chatting away about mundane things. A couple of butterflies fluttered by them with the occasional fairy in the mix, much to Rose's delight as Hermione brushed out her thick reddish brown hair.

"So Ron." His wife broke in at one point. "What's this I hear about a professional Wizarding challenge coming up?" Ron frowned and saw that she was looking at him through the corner of her eye. She shouldn't have known about that. He shifted a moment while trying to organize his thoughts.

“I’m not really sure-“

“Don’t play games with me about this Ron. I still have plenty of Ministry contacts and a lot of them are abuzz with this. So spill. We will just find out anyways.” Everyone was quiet and watching him intently. He gave a sigh.

“All right. It’s going to be announced in a couple of days anyways. Shackbot wants to do a Tri-wizard type of thing for adults. It’s gonna be grueling and very dangerous. One contest no restrictions except for the Unforgivables or curses that kill. He wants it to be the première challenge for the Wizards of Europe.”

“Wow.” Ginny breathed, but Hermione bit her lip with worry.

“I don’t know Ron. It sounds dangerous.” she said.

“It will be. Very. They are going to set it up in a large maze like structure. The entry fee will be huge unless you can demonstrate your abilities or have suitable recognition of your skills in the Wizarding world. They don’t want just any shop owner trying to go in with school hexes and laughing charms and getting killed.”

“This sounds interesting.” Eric said. “And what is the prize going to be?”

“A phoenix egg.” All three of them gasped at that little bit of news.

“Sweet Merlin, Ron.” his wife said. “No one has been able to lay their hands on one of those since Dumbledore bonded with Fawkes.” hers’ and Ginny’s eyes were wide with wonder. Ron nodded.

“We expect a big turn out of the best that the Wizarding World has to offer. It’s going to be called Merlin’s Maze. I don’t know much, but they are importing some Chimera, Dragons, a couple vampire volunteered and...a Medusa.”

“NO!” Hermione gasped. “Ron that outrageous! People are going to die if you bring one of those in!” Ron shook his head.



"You know that odd business that's been helping the Ministry out? Perfect Protections?" the other three nodded. "Well we asked them to come up with an artifact that won't make the Medusa stare deadly so that it could be reversed. Although people could still die in plenty of other ways."

"Ron." Ginny decided to put her two cents in. "Are you going to be entering in the tournament?"

"No he is not!" Hermione declared rather hotly. "He has a family and a daughter to worry about." She stared at him hard daring him to defy her on this. The red headed Auror squirmed under the look.

"I can't. Aurors are going to be on guard to pull people out who are injured and can't continue. We aren't allowed to compete." Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"So did this company find a way to block the Medusa sight?" Eric asked with interest. Ron nodded eagerly.

"Yeah it's an amulet that goes around the thing's neck. From what I heard it was a bloody dangerous task just getting the amulet on the thing. A couple of handlers almost died. I tell you Perfect Protections is one hell of a business. Their products have saved so many lives. Including my own several times. We still can't find out who runs and owns the company. They are like a ghost. We don't look too much into it though. We don't want them to stop supplying the Ministry."

"I want to compete." Ginny said suddenly.

"WHAT?!" the other three said in unison.

"I am going to sign up." She said simply, taking off her hat and running her fingers through the silken red that was her hair.

"No your not." Ron said with typical brotherly stubbornness.

"I must agree with Ronald." Eric agreed. "It is far too dangerous." Ginny just gave a shrug having already made up her mind.

"I am a grown woman and I hold the Order of Merlin Third class. I've fought in a war and gone undercover in the Heart of Death Eaters and that was when I was just sixteen. I am much more proficient now and I am sure Ron and Hermione can help me brush up on my defense skills and show me some spells that will come in handy."

"I must insist Ginevra. I can't have you risking yourself in such a silly pursuit of fame. I don't know anything about this Order of Merlin or what Death Eaters are, but I hardly think a Quidditch player can handle something like this."

The Ron and Hermione stared at Eric like he was daft and Ginny glared at him like she was going to knife the poor man.

"You don't know what Death Eaters are or what the Order of Merlin is?" Hermione asked in a shocked stupor. "I thought everyone knows?" Ron nodded numbly. Eric just shrugged.

"I am from far west in the States. I've only been in Europe for little more than a year."

"So you don't know about Harry Potter?" Ron asked in a voice of stunned disbelief.

"Who?"

"Ron!" Ginny hissed between clenched teeth.

"Harry Potter! The-Boy-Who-Lived! Savior of Wizarding Europe! Defeater of Voldemort the greatest Dark Lord in a century! Winner of the Tri-Wizard Tournament! One of the most powerful Wizards in the world!" Ron was flailing his arms like some ungainly bird in utter frustration. He pointed to Ginny. "Ginny's first love! Her almost fiancé! HARRY POTTER! You don't know about him?!"

Eric blinked at him like he was mad. Then frowned and turned to look at Ginny who was doing her best to hide her face in her hair.

"No. I do not know about this Harry Potter. Ginevra failed to mention any of this." He spoke in a mild rebuke causing Ginny to flinch and

twiddle her thumbs in nervousness. Ron sighed and looked at Hermione, beseeching her to explain. She gave a snort and turned on her 'teaching mode' as Ron liked to call it.

"Eric if your going to live here, and do business in England effectively, you must know out past. Harry Potter is part of that past. A very important part. The first thing you must understand that Harry is a man just like anyone else. But to England he might as well be the second coming of Merlin."

Eric raised a brow at this and leaned back with a look of sarcastic doubt on his face, but stayed quiet to listen.

"Decades ago a man named Tom Marvolo Riddle organized a group of Wizards and Witches under the ideal that the only ones who should practice magic are pure bloods and half bloods, and that muggleborns should be killed or expelled from the Wizarding World. He called himself Lord Voldemort. What you need to understand as well is that Voldemort was possibly the greatest practitioner of Dark Magic ever recorded. His powers were frightening." Hermione said this with such a grim finality that Eric shifted with a frown.

"For nine years he waged a war on the Ministry of Magic. The only man who held him at bay for so long was the former Headmaster of Hogwarts. Albus Dumbledore." Eric nodded with recognition.

"Him I have heard of. Even in the states he was something of a legend. Please continue." Hermione gave a nod.

"Well even Dumbledore was losing the battle. There were many dead and missing and the Ministry was on the verge of collapse. Then suddenly a seer made a prophecy that a child would be born that could stop Voldemort. Naturally, he heard about this and it set into motion some of the most important events in our history."

"Voldemort moved on Harry, and through a betrayal in the family, and the side of good, he was able to find their location. He attacked the Potters and killed Lily and James, Harry's parents. However when he tried to kill Harry, who was one year old at the time his curse

rebounded on him for some reason and he was killed himself. Or so everyone thought.”

“From that point on they called him the Boy-Who-Lived. Because he was the only one ever to have survived the Avada Kedavra curse.”

Eric sat up suddenly at that news. “Impossible.” He said. “There is no surviving that spell. It is instant death. There is no way to counter it. Nor is there any magic shield that could stop it.” Hermione shook her head.

“Harry did survive it. That is what made him a Legend. He is the only one. Harry knows why, but he had never gone into any detail with any of us on this.”

“You knew this Potter?” Hermione nodded.

“Myself and Ron were best friends with him in Hogwarts and during the war, but let me continue please.”

“So anyways. Harry vanished without a trace for ten years only to resurface when he went to Hogwarts for his magical education. His time there was interesting for him to say the least, as well as Ron and I, as we were inseparable. Voldemort was still around, however. He had found a piece of dark magic that prevented his death ten years before, and he was living as a wraith. In Harry’s first year he stopped Voldemort from returning to life, by use of an artifact called the Philosophers Stone.”

“In his second Year he stopped him once again from returning to life by saving Ginny. Who was a first year at that time.”

“Saving Ginny?” Eric asked and looked at his girlfriend who was busy pouring herself a hefty glass of wine swallowing it greedily. Hermione just nodded and continued.

“Voldemort had a diary with a piece of his soul contained within. Ginny thought it was just an ordinary diary and began to write it in, not knowing that it would start to possess her. Eventually it would have drained her life force, killed her, and Voldemort would once

again return. Harry solved the puzzle, destroyed the diary and saved Ginny's life. All in one night, as a second year Hogwarts student." Hermione took a sip of wine as well to wet her throat.

"In his forth year however Voldemort was finally able to contact some of his fractured followers and he manipulated a school event called the Tri-wizard Tournament. His follow turned the final trophy, which Harry and one other contestant laid hands on, to become a port key and stole Harry away to a graveyard, where Voldemort waited. Once he and his follower had Harry, who was you must understand was just a fourth year Hogwarts student and was no match for them, they subdued him. They enacted a dark ritual using Harry's blood and Voldemort returned to the flesh in all his dark and evil glory."

"Somehow, Harry never went into details again, he was able to battle Voldemort to a standstill and escape with the dead body of his fellow Tri-Wizard contestant via the port key that took them there. After that the war started anew. Voldemort quickly gathered his followers again and rose to full power much faster than before, due to the idiocy of the Ministry at that time, and their slow response to the threat."

"For three years he waged war again until, finally, he was able to have Dumbledore killed, and that paved the way to take over the Ministry. Once the Ministry fell and was in his control, myself, Ron, and Harry, went into hiding to find a way to finally kill Voldemort for good."

"How?" Eric asked having become very interested in the story.

"I can't tell you the details I am sorry it is classified. To make a long story short for almost an entire year the three of us were on the run and in hiding. Harry finally figured out how to kill him and it boiled down to The Battle of Hogwarts. It was Voldemort, and all of his Death Eaters, and corrupt Ministry support, against Harry, the Order of the Phoenix and the Hogwarts staff. Luckily, Harry's cause and name was able to rally the other Magical creatures and the nearby village of Hogsmead for aid. Together they were able to defeat his army and Harry and Voldemort battled in the Great Hall of Hogwarts. Single handed, Harry was able to defeat and kill Voldemort for good. He saved the Wizarding world restored muggleborn rights, freed the

Centaur, Goblins and House-elves and allowed the Ministry to reform.”

Hermione looked at Eric very seriously.

“There is no one person more revered, loved, respected and deserving of all this than Harry James Potter. He is and forever will be our savior, and dear friend.” She was then quiet letting Eric absorb this monumental news.

“Is he really that strong of a wizard? Couldn’t this Lord Voldemort be weak?” Ron laughed at that and threw in his own two cents.

“Voldemort had an army the likes no one in the Wizarding World had ever seen. He has almost all the Vampires, Werewolves, Giants and Dementors under his control. He had an army of Inferni which are dead bodies animated through dark magic. He was a Master dueler, a Master Legillimens, and a Master Occulmancer. He could duel Dumbledore to a standstill and the only way that Dumbledore was able to hold his own is classified as well, but let’s just say he had a magical artifact that enhanced his powers. Voldemort just used his magic, no enhancements. No! Harry is very smart and very strong.”

Eric shifted a bit and looked at Ginny, who was still doing her best to ignore them all, and played with Rose, keeping the little girl occupied.

“One other thing.” Ron just had to say this. “He was very close with our family. He was like an adopted son to our mum. He saved my Mum’s life, Ginny’s life, my life and my Dad’s life. To speak bad of Harry in this family, is akin to spitting on our mum. It just doesn’t fly.”

“Ginevra.” Eric spoke to her. “You loved him? Like a hero or something more?” Ginny set her mouth into a thin line and just shrugged, they could see she really wasn’t up to talking. So Eric turned to Ron and Hermione for an explanation. Ron gave a nod.

“They were an item for a short while. Harry loved her very much.” Ginny scoffed at this and folded her arms to glare at Ron.

Eric pressed the issue however; trying to get to the bottom of the Ginny and Harry situation. "So where is this Harry Potter now? How come I've never seen or heard of him till now?"

Everyone looked down and sad this time.

"He left us." Ginny finally spoke up very softly. Everyone could still hear the hurt evident in her voice. "He sprouted some rubbish about needing some time to himself and left us alone. No one has seen or heard from him in seven years."

Ginny stood up after this quiet statement and smoothed down her dress before twisting and apparating away. Ron and Hermione sighed while Eric looked silently at the spot that she vanished from.

"She loved him didn't she?" The long haired man asked. The two nodded silently. He looked disgruntled and stood up in a huff. Brushing off his pants and clean white shirt, he did not look pleased and said only one thing before he too vanished.

"She still loves him I think."

The sound of a 'pop' had barely faded before Hermione turned on Ron with the viciousness of a badger.

"You idiot!"

"What did I do? Ginny is the one who started talking that nonsense about entering the challenge! She brought up the war and the Death Eaters!"

"You were the one who mentioned Harry, and that she used to date him!" Ron just shrugged at that.

"What? He doesn't have a right to know? Ginny would never tell him, and I honestly thought he knew! I mean, how can someone NOT know about Harry and the war?" Hermione just gave him and glare and pulled Rose into her lap, who was tugging on her robe insistently.

"This isn't going to bode well for Eric and Ginny."

“Good.” he said with satisfaction. Hermione felt like slapping him when he said that. “There is something about that guy that I don’t like. There are some investigations towards some illegal trafficking of banned products, and they are starting to point towards the two largest importers and exporters of magical goods. One of them is his company. He isn’t good for Ginny. You heard that rubbish is was sprouting about her job, and what he said when she wanted to join the tournament. He thinks women have a place and is trying to fit Ginny into it. If I ever said that rubbish to you, you would divorce me and throw me on the street.”

Hermione couldn’t keep up the façade of her anger. If truth be told, she wasn’t too fond of Eric either, but for reasons she couldn’t say, both personal and professional, from her time with the Department of Mysteries. Eric was a man who played dangerously in shades of grey.

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Ginny arrived back in her flat, and hurled her hat across the room. She stomped to her room and took off her dress, and threw on some sweats and a baggy tee shirt. She opened the door to her exercise area and marched in. Every Quidditch player’s home was allowed, what was dubbed by the players, as a tiny pitch. It was basically a super enlarged field inside of a room with weather charms and work out equipment. Hermione had introduced Ginny to some of the muggle items and Ginny had taken a liking to them. Still, what she needed now was a good run. So she tied her hair back into a pony tail, and started at a slow pace around the indoor track, gradually building up speed. The pounding of her feet on the cushioned pavement, and the soft breeze, from the weather charms, helped her to forget her trouble,s as she breathed in and out with the rhythm of her running.

She noticed him on her third lap, but ignored him and continued her run. Eric just took a seat and watched her during her workout. He was a good man that way. He could be pushy at times, but knew when to back off. She wished he hadn’t of followed her, but still expected it.



She used her time during her laps to organize her thoughts. She knew what he would ask, and she also knew she had to be very careful in her answers. Eric wasn't the kind of man to be 'settled' for. He was demanding in his need to be first in her thoughts, and if he thought that Ginny still carried a torch for some hero-savior-super-wizard he wouldn't be pleased.

After her sixth and final lap she slowed to a walk to allow her, rather trim and athletic body, time to cool down, so she didn't cramp up. Walking half a lap she finally headed to where Eric was sitting, and picked up a towel to wipe her face, arms, and the top of her chest. He watched her silently, waiting for her to speak first.

"It's not what you think. It was a long time ago."

"It doesn't seem that way at the moment."

"Just some bad memories I did my best to forget." She said rather curtly. The conversation already was not going as she planned.

"The love of your life, a bad memory?" He said it rather sarcastically causing her hackles to raise.

"He was not the love of my life. I was just a little school girl with a crush. I've been over him for a long time now. It hurt when he left yes, but I moved on."

"Oh yes. Moved on so much that you rushed away from the picnic and drank half a bottle of wine in under five minutes." Ginny huffed and shot her boyfriend a small glare.

"He is gone and isn't coming back Eric. You don't have to get jealous of some face from my past."

"And if he does? If he comes back what then?"

"He isn't. If he hasn't already after all this time he won't ever." Eric looked doubtful and very disgruntled. Ginny sighed and sat down next to him and took his face in her hands. "I'm with you Eric and you make me very happy. I don't love Harry, and won't go running off

after him at the hint of his name. I am your lover. Not his and never will be.” She leaned over and brushed his lips with hers. He still looked doubtful, but gave a small nod and returned the kiss.

With a squeal, she found her self being lifted up by the strong wizard, and flung over his shoulder. She laughed and pounded his back.

“Eric! You rogue! Put me down this instant!”

“You, Ginevra Molly Weasley, have more secrets than I thought. Let us go explore some of those dark places and see what we can find.”

She squealed again as he cupped her bum and she laughed and tried to squirm out of his hold as he carried her to the bedroom.

Several hours later, after Eric had left and the sun had set, Ginny sat in her robe in her favorite chair, and looked out of her French glass window door, and over the balcony into the city. Her thoughts were jumbled together, and sweet and bitter memories, of years gone past, fluttered before her eyes.

She sat with a glass of fire whiskey that she occasionally sipped. She pointed her wand to a bookshelf and muttered ‘Accio’ softly. A rather large red bound book floated through the air and into her waiting hands. She set it reverently into her lap, and with trembling hands, opened the cover. She hadn’t opened this thing in five years. She didn’t know why she wanted to now.

The pictures were like a punch in the gut. Her and Colin in the Library. In the background she could see Harry and Ron in a far table arguing over something. It was her second year. Her hands brushed some more and she turned the page. Her third year. The year of the tri-wizard tournament. Harry and Hermione bent over some scrolls, writing what was probably an essay. Ginny was at the table with them working on her own stuff. She kept glancing shyly over at Harry. It was another Colin’s pictures. Harry looked so serious and focused in that picture. Like the brooding dark hero. She skipped a bunch of pages towards her fifth year. The best year, as far as she was concerned back then.

Her hand and breath faltered on the one special picture. It was the largest and took up an entire page. It was their first kiss. When she won the Quidditch Cup, and he charged in and just picked her up and kissed her.

She could recall that moment even now. The shocked feeling. Her eyes closed afraid to open them. That it might be a dream, and she would see the whole Wizarding World laughing at her. Running through the hallways afterward, and down by the lake. Asking him to be the one to stop any dangerous explorations of their relationship too soon. It was all a flood of memories and emotions that made her heart flutter and beat painfully.

She turned to another page and looked at the next picture carefully. She let loose a savage cry, and flung the book across the room where it hit the wall and fell to the floor. She curled up tighter into her robe, and cried her broken little heart out all over again.

The book had settled to the picture that caused her to break down. Ginny and Harry under a tree in the early spring. They were both smiling wide with their arms wrapped around each other. That was the day that Harry first told anyone that he loved them. That he loved her. The day he told her that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

The Liar.

## Chapter 3

### Trouble at Hogwarts

It was one week after that tenuous time by the pond, and Hermione Weasley was frantically tearing apart her opulent office in Hogwarts. In six hours time the new students would be arriving to start the new term, and she could not, for the life of her, find her notes and the set of class schedules that would need to be handed out at the end of the feast. Minerva was slowly grooming the young teacher to take over as Deputy Headmaster, as Professor Flitwick was getting closer and closer to retiring. As such Minerva wanted to have Hermione attend to setting up the school schedules and Quidditch games. A small step to what Hermione knew was hundreds of other duties.

Alas she was near to tears, at the loss of all her hard work, and the chaos it would cause. The past few days had been hitch after hitch in her perfectly ordered plan. It all started two days after she took her break and spent the day with her family, and a rather randy night with Ron. She had returned first thing the next morning, due to an urgent summons from Minerva. An owl had practically broken the window of their small cottage home in the country to get to Hermione. Ron had grudgingly, and with much cursing, climbed out of their warm bed and opened the window. The owl in turn, pecked insistently at Hermione till she finally untied the letter. It read.

To All Hogwarts Staff,

Urgent. Everyone is to return immediately to the school for an emergency meeting. All other activities are put on hold while we deal with the current crisis. No delay or excuses will be tolerated. Details will be given upon arrival.

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Naturally Hermione, being who she was, was up and dressed in a heartbeat, doing her best to placate her confused and concerned husband, who was rattling off questions that she didn't have an answer a brief kiss to her forlorn husband who usually was very insistent on the duties of marriage in the morning, she flooded to her office to find Minerva pacing back and forth wearing a hole in the lush carpet.

"Oh Mrs. Weasley. Thank Merlin you arrived."

"Minerva, I insist that you call me Hermione. Now what's going on? You have me thinking the school is under siege or something!"

"Oh nothing as simple as that dear child. It is much worse! A teacher has refused to come back this term and just informed me today!" McGonagall bit at her nails and resumed her pacing; looking like the world was ending. Hermione seriously thought that the Headmistress needed to get her priorities in order.

"Minerva that isn't such a big deal. People are lined up to accept a teaching position at Hogwarts. You could have it filled in a couple of days." McGonagall however shook her head.

"Not the Defense position!" At this, Hermione cringed.

"Jutter isn't coming back?" Minerva shook her head in denial.

"Whatever for? He was panting for the position last year!"

"Some academy in the states offered him some ludicrous amount of money to come and help them. The same as the last two professors. The damn colonies are poaching every decent DADA professor we can get our hands on. It's like someone over there is purposely trying to keep us from getting a decent instructor!" Minerva rounded on Hermione.

"You will have to take the post until we can find someone suitable!"

Hermione sputtered. "Me?! Ask one of the other the staff when they arrive! Surely Slughorn wouldn't mind spending his last year teaching Defense! His knowledge is amazing!"

Minerva just shook her head. "I already asked him, and that note was just sent to you, it's a standard emergency summons already written up. I didn't have time to make it more personalized. Anyways he declined, and threatened to quit right then if I tried to force him into it so I had to back down. It wouldn't due to pose the Potions Master on such short notice as well. They are even harder to find."

Hermione and Minerva took to some chairs to try and work things out.

"Minerva. I don't have the new standard qualifications that the Ministry insists to fill the position. I haven't cast a decent curse or a shield in years! I would be horrible for the students!"

"Hermione. You have never forgotten a spell or wand movement in your life. Unlike me. I would fare worse than you teaching that class, but if you temporarily fill the spot till we can find someone, I can take over your classes."

The bushy haired Order of Merlin holder fretted at this and tried to find a way out of it. She never did like Defense and honestly believed that she would not be able to accurately get the entire point of the course across to the students. She was too kind hearted.

"There must be someone else besides me!"

"Of course there is, but none want the position. There is a rumor going around in those elite circles that the curse of the position has resurfaced, and that it would be dire to take it up. I must go outside of England to find someone."

"What about one of the Aurors. Surely the Ministry could spare someone." The elder professor shook her head curtly.

"They will all be needed for that damnable Tournament coming up and are preparing. I already asked. What about Miss. Weasley?"

Would your husband's sister consider the possible spot?" At this Hermione shook her head as well.

"She has made up her mind to participate in the Tournament, when the signups begin after the announcement later today. She would probably take it, but if she is going to join that escapade, then she will need all her spare time preparing, studying, and practicing her spell work. Taking this position could end up killing her when she goes in there."

Both the intelligent women sighed, running through their minds of possible people.

"What about Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"Criminal record. The boards of Governors' are absolutely adamant about the position requirements after the war. Hermione you are the only one with qualifications and the experience to take over the class. For Merlin's sake dear child it's only temporary and we need you!"

Hermione eventually agreed and thankfully Jutter, the former Defense Master, had left fully documented notes, and as detailed a lesson plan as Hermione herself made. Losing him was bad. He was as good as Remus or Severus ever was and had a perky personality that the students enjoyed. Replacing him at the start of term would be next to impossible.

In the following days there had been a mysterious fire in the library that destroyed several rare books. Filch went missing for close to an entire day, only to turn up wandering aimlessly out of the Dark Forest and Hadrid's small clan of Formean Gnomes had, somehow, broken out of their cage and were off causing no end of trouble in Hogsmead.

Then there was the mysterious opening of the first market shop of the shadowy company called Perfect Protections in Hogsmead. One of the wealthier families had sold off their prized estate suddenly and left, giving no explanation and the next day there is construction going on, with a large 'Coming Soon' sign posted out front. Hermione had stared at that sign for close to thirty minutes. She couldn't shake the

feeling that 'Coming Soon' was more of a statement to Hogwarts and the Wizarding World, than the Hogsmead populous.

With her vast brain power poured into the problems, the only connections she could find was the timing of all these problems so close together, and the fact that none of them had any connection what so ever.

Her latest problem was the missing notes and lesson plans that Jutter had left. She had Ron look everywhere in the House, and at one point she had moved out every item in her office one by one while she searched. It just wasn't there.

Finally six hours before term started she found herself once more going over every page and folder she had. Sheet by Sheet. Finally, two hours till the students arrived, she threw the papers down in disgust, and buried her head in her hands and let herself have a good silent cry. Minerva was going to kill her. She was going to have to wing the first week, on top of the rest of her duties. She was also going to have to help Ginny with her spell work in her spare time and she just didn't know how to fit it all in.

A soft knock on the door caused her to lift her head and wipe her eyes.

"Enter." she said softly.

Professor Flitwick entered and gave her a cheerful little wave.

"Hello Professor Weasley! Ready for the start of term I trust!" His happy face and bouncing step was just what she did not need at the moment. She gave the tiny man a scowl.

"Oh dear! That doesn't bode well at all. Well what's the matter? Maybe two heads are better than one!" He gave another beaming smile and rocked back and forth on his heels with his hands in his pockets. She wanted to hex that smile right off his cheerful little face. She gathered he got the idea and switched to a slightly more somber mood before Hermione answered his question.



"My notes and lesson plans for the entire year are gone. They are nowhere to be found at home or here in my office, or in the staff lounge. They have effectively vanished. I am going to look like a fool in front of the school."

Filius rubbed his grey mustache and tugged at one of his slightly pointed ears.

"Have you thought about flooing Jutter to see if he had a copy or could give you an idea of what he had planned?"

Hermione blinked for a second then leapt around the table to pick up a laughing and squealing little professor and plant a big wet kiss on his forehead.

"Oh thank you professor!" Hermione said as if she was once again one of his students. "That's a great idea! But what about the class schedules for the students?"

"Oh that's no problem there. You were required to write it on that scroll that Minerva gave you?" Hermione nodded.

"That's taken care of then. That scroll automatically updates in Minerva's office. I'd imagine, with an extra couple hours tonight, you, myself and Minerva, could get them all ready with some clever uses of the Gemino charm."

Hermione put a hand over her fluttering and relieved heart as she finally calmed down.

"Oh thank you Professor. You don't know what a relief this is. I wish I had come to you sooner instead of wasting three days needlessly."

"Well you should do it more often. We are all here to support each other and not just the students. Now let's get to the real reason I came by."

"Oh of course. I'm sorry. Please have a seat." Hermione made the instant switch back from student to teacher and moved around her

desk and smoothed out her dark robes before sitting down in her lush chair.”

“Thank you Mrs. Weasley. Now about that fire in the Library. Since you have taken over the duties of the Defense teach temporarily, have you discovered anything about it?”

“I’m afraid not if a spell was used it was not a simple one. If not, then a more complex spell that is hidden from almost all detection spells. I considered the fact that it was a mundane fire and not magical at all, but there were two volumes of ancient spell texts that were charmed to resist fire. Whatever started it, it was an extremely powerful flame based charm. Not a curse, but a charm.”

“And why do you say that?”

“I can think of only one flame based curse that could break through the protections of the library and that is Fiendfyre. There might be others, but I am awaiting a consultation from some of the Dark Art’s experts in the Auror department. But even then, something along the lines of Fiendfyre would leave a signature, and would not be as controlled as this fire was.”

“What do you mean by controlled?” Hermione thought this over for a moment.

“The fire only affected a certain area. Curses generally cause uncontrolled damage. There are many charms however, as I am sure you are aware, that can cause vast amounts of destruction, but at the casters discretion if used correctly. It’s a clever amount of spell work. In fact Professor. Considering how difficult it would be to get into Hogwarts undetected, and even more so to break her protections, the charm mastery needed makes you the prime suspect Filius.”

Hermione’s gaze sharpened and bore down on the diminutive man, but to her surprise he clapped his hands and gave her a beaming smile.

“Oh that’s just wonderful Mrs. Weasley! I am inclined to award you 100 points if you were still a student, but as such I can just say, that your intelligence once more astounds me!” Hermione frowned a bit.

“Professor, are you saying that it was indeed you who did this.” She started to inch for her wand. The little man blinked a second then waved his hands frantically and shook his head, quite flustered.

“Oh dear no! I just meant to imply that your reasoning was flawless, and that indeed I would normally be a suspect. However, I was with Minerva at the time, and with our Potions Master hours earlier. I have my alibi. It must be someone else.”

Hermione let out the breath she was holding and eased her hand back away from her wand.

“I still think it might have been someone from the staff.”

“Ah but I must disagree there.”

“Why?”

“Well you haven’t been a teacher here as long as most of us, but we can all attest that many students who have graduated have, on occasion, snuck back into the castle, especially during the summer months. It isn’t as difficult as you may think. It would take a genius of a student to pull this off yes, but I could probably give you about 100 names with the skills.”

“Well I am still waiting on a detailed report of what books were damaged and destroyed from Madam Prince. Once I have that list, I can determine if it was meant just to cause a little bit of mischief, or if it was a more malicious act.”

“Very well, but if I may. There are rumors that the Unspeakables had access to a certain spell that could shall we say, re-enact the crime scene with magical signatures? Wouldn’t you know that spell, having been one of the foremost spell smiths in the department?” The little man waggled his brows, as if such a thing was spoken of between the confidences of two friends. Hermione’s back stiffened and she

threw on a mask that she had not used since she had served in dark rooms of the Ministry.

“Filius Flitwick.” her voice was remarkable cold causing the aged professor to blink and lose his budding excitement. “Such knowledge is most assuredly mistaken; and any spells as such, are prohibited from being cast outside of the Ministry without personal permission of the Minister of Magic. To inquire any further, or to seek to cast illegal spells, is to invite your wand to be broken and your license for practicing magic revoked. I hope I have made myself clear.”

Flitwick licked his lips. “Oh my. I guess that was very rude of me. I am sorry, let’s just forget I mentioned it. Clearly it is...umm...unspeakable.” He tried to grin at his little attempt to lighten the mood. It didn’t work and he made some hasty excuses and exited the room in a hurry. When he was gone Hermione allowed the mask to fall and she slumped down in her chair.

There was indeed such a spell and she knew it; and had used several variations of it. But it was dangerous and expensive to cast. The Ministry would never condone its use for a mere library fire. She was surprised the energetic professor would even dare hint at what he knew, was classified information. Technically, she was required to send a notice to the department that an inquiry was made to her about the spell, but Ron had corrupted her sense of duty too much and she decided to let it slide.

Putting it aside, she wrote out a lengthy request to the former defense professor explaining the situation and hoping that he could help her. She sent it off with her owl and got out her cloak, and tossed it over her robes. It was close to the time the new students would arrive and she needed to be ready. She exited her office and started to head to Minerva’s office to discuss some final details.

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Ron was in the right state as he tied a conjured bandage around his arm. He took a swift swallow of a potion that a mediwitch had just

handed him and felt some of the dizziness of the poison subside. His team had finally managed to subdue the Manticore whose scorpion like tail had left a nasty gash in his arm. Stunners weren't doing anything to the beast so they finally had resorted to a mix of Reduction and Obliteration charms to damage it enough to allow the incarcerous incantation to hold it. In the end two of his team made had been clawed and its poisonous tail has snagged Ron. And that was just today.

Most of the Auror department was battered bruised and nursing various wounds in trying to set up the Maze for the upcoming tournament. In one months time it would be ready. The sheer amount of dangerous creatures, curses, charms and magical artifacts and substances that needed to be provided was daunting, even by Ministry standards. It would take them the month to prepare and many were waiting for some of the Aurors to die trying to accomplish it. However the tournament was announced and incoming funds were already pouring in from the hefty entrance fees. The Minister had decided to declare that in addition to the Phoenix Egg the winner and runner up would each receive the Order of Merlin Third Class for their bravery and excellent skills and knowledge. Those two prizes had people flocking in to take the entrance exams to qualify. That alone set people back fifty Galleons, but the Ministry hoped to bring in triple the profit compared to the costs of setting up the tournament in the fees and marketing and sponsorships it was going to produce.

"Hey Weasley!" Ron turned to see Auror Hedgefield walking towards him. "Is the Manticore secured because we need some Obfuscation charms put on some Devil's Snare pits."

Ron scrunched up his nose at that. "Why so early? They will fade in a couple weeks time even if the strongest of us casts them."

Hedgefield frowned at that and thought it over a bit.

"Well it's kind of near the center of the maze. Once we put up some of the other enchantments it's gonna be damn hard to get in there around the start of the tournament to put them on."

Ron put his good arm behind his head and scratched.

"Tell you what. Why don't you take a couple of people and head down to Magical Maintenance. I saw something several months ago called and Obfuscation Rod. They should have some there. Take them over to the Department of Mysteries and ask them to throw a protean charm on a single rod. That way you can throw the rods in the pit and when the time of the tournament comes you can use the main rod and the rest will activate. Should accomplish what you need."

Hedgefield blink in surprise. "You know what Weasley. That's a great idea, but I doubt the Unspeakables will waste their time on this."

"Just say it's on tournament business. You can procure almost anything from any department for that, per the Minister."

"Ha! Will do thanks!"

When Ron saw him get far enough away he smirked. He was under Hedgefield and as such he should have been the one to go to all that trouble, but he had deftly manipulated the senior Auror into doing it himself. It wouldn't last though, he turned to his team that was quietly laughing at what he did.

"All right guys, we caught a break there, lets vanish to someplace quiet and get a drink before we get dragged into milking some nameless creature for it's venom." The rest nodded eagerly and they started to head back to the office to gather their things.

When Ron rounded his cubical he had to stop however as Kingsley Shacklebot was sitting there going over some of his old case files.

"Minister! What can I do for you?" Ron could never get used to the man, even though he knew him from the days of the Order. He still got flustered around the top officials of the Ministry.

"Ah Ron. I was hoping you would come by soon. Let's take a walk." The dark skinned man stood up suddenly and began moving away. Ron struggled to gather up his cloak and raced after him. As they were walking down the halls Kingsley spoke up.

"Your sister Ginny applied to enter the tournament, I thought you should know." Ron scowled and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"I hope she was turned down. She isn't cut out for this. She is great in a pinch or a spell battle, but the things she will be facing she didn't learn about in school or on the Quidditch pitch."

"I'm afraid I can't turn her down Ron. I wanted to, because I agree with you, but she is an Order of Merlin holder and that automatically promises her a spot if she wants it. I can't change the rules for each person. She is a competent witch I am sure she will be alright."

"I hope you're right Minister. If anything happens to her you know my Mum will lay into me and then come see you for a visit." Kingsley flat out blanched at that and looked around as if afraid Molly would somehow show her face.

"I'm confident in your sister's ability for survival." They finally arrived to one of the old interrogation rooms that had not been used for some time. Ron glanced uneasily at the Minister.

"Go on it Ron. We need to talk." The Minister's face was grim. Ron gulped a bit, but opened the door to the dim room. Inside the Head of Magical Law Enforcement Pius Thicknesse was sitting at a table looking at a report. After his father had served two years in the position, handling all the trials and rebuilding the Aurors, he retired; and Pius was reinstated, after it was proven that he was under a very powerful Imperious curse during the final months of Voldemort. Ron never agreed with the appointment, but Thicknesse was a good boss, who struggled constantly to put the stain of his past behind him and made some good decisions. Ron looked back as the Minister closed the door behind him.

"Take a seat Ron." Ron was now very nervous. This had all the marks of an investigation on him, but Ron couldn't figure out why. He decided to play it by ear and took a seat in the hard cold metal chair across from his boss. Kingsley conjured up a chair for himself at the side of the table and sat down. He motioned with his head towards Pius and folded his hands in front of him.

"Weasley," Pius started to speak, "Forgive us this setting, but something strange has come to our attention, and we need to talk to you about it." He pulled out a sheet of paper and slid it across the table. "Can you explain this for us please?" Ron looked at it and saw that it was a request form to procure a Pillar of Dusk that could cast a never-ending sleep charm in an area.

"This is a request form that I filled out last week for the tournament." Pius nodded.

"And this?" He slid another one over. This time it was a request form for the tracking table that the Aurors sometimes used to hunt down certain rogue dark creatures. He had never seen this one before, but never the less his signature was on it.

"I never ordered this."

"But is that your signature?" Ron shifted a bit and gave a nod.

"Yes, but I don't know how it got there." The Minister and Pius glanced at each other causing Ron to swallow a bit of bile that had rose up.

"What about this?" He slid a third document over. Ron studied it a moment and blinked and grew very worried.

"Sir I don't have the authority to do something like this. I would be fired. Yes it's my signature again, but I promise you, I never gave these orders!" he said rather urgently, afraid he was about to lose his job. The document in question was an order to stop all surveillance on a man named Jordon Calbroise. One of the largest smugglers of exotic goods in England. Several months ago three teams had been assigned to investigate the man after an odd tip informed them that he was dealing in some illegal materials. The reassigning of teams on an open investigation was rarely done without the authority of the head of Magic Law Enforcement. Ron could do it if needed, but he would need the personal permission of Thicknesse to do it.



“Ron this is important. Are you absolutely sure you did not sign this, even by mistake.”

“I swear sir. The only things I’ve signed lately are procurement requests for the tournament and I wrote out a personal request each time rather than have one handed to me. A glamour charm could easily conceal a different order, like that trouble we had a few years back, so I’ve always been very careful about that. You can ask anyone.”

The two other men frowned and looked at each other a long time before kinglet turned to Ron.

“We believe you Ron, we already knew most of this before we brought you in, and we just had to talk to you to be sure.” Ron let out a breath he had not known he was holding.

“Do you mind if I ask what this is about sir?”

“Well Ron. We got a tip that Calbroise was going to import about half a ton of mummy dust. It’s normally a harmless substance, but it is banned for certain reason and that much of the substance really got our attention. You see Ron mummy dust is only used in dark magic and there could only be one reason for that much dust to be brought into the country. The dust is an important factor in the creation of Inferni.”

Ron felt a chill run down his spine. He had never seen one of the things, but Harry had told him enough that he never wanted to.

“How many can be made with a half of ton of this dust?” he heard himself whisper with dread.

“A lot, thousands in fact.” Ron gulped. This was serious. “When we got the teams back onto Jordon it was too late. The shipment had come in and he was off the charts. We can’t find him anywhere. We believe he must be hiding under the Fidelus Charm.”

Ron pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is going to get worse isn't it." He asked.

"Yes. The table that was requested under your signature has gone missing and it is the only reliable means we gave to track that many Inferni if they are created. Once they are active we would have no way to find out where they are without an exhaustive effort. Inferni are magically hidden from most detection and scrying spells. This many Inferni is a danger on the level of Voldemort. The dust that was brought in was a rare specimen from Lower Egypt. Our experts tell us that it can be used to create a breed of the things that animate whomever they kill to be like them."

"Dear Merlin." Ron said. "They could send those things into a muggle village and we could have ten thousand of those things bearing down on us!"

"Yes. And this is where you come in. We think we know who might be behind it, but we dare not move unless we are sure. We need you to quietly investigate the man."

"Anything."

"Thank you. We need to fire you for this job. For the time being you are going to lose all privileges of an Auror. You will need to play the part of a disgruntled ex-employee very well. When it's all over your reputation and rank will of course be reinstated and I will personally see to it that each and every Auror knows that it was an undercover assignment. Can you do this?"

"Me? I play the part of unsatisfied prat like no other." Ron grinned at the Minister. "Tell me what I need to know. I won't fail you." Both the Kingsley and Pius nodded with satisfaction and together they began their shadowy investigation.

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After she led the jittery first years into the Great Hall, and the Sorting Hat had given another one of its droll speeches, she began the roll

call for the sorting. It was a great privilege and honor that Minerva had allowed her to do this. She would always remember her nervousness during her sorting. No one really forgot. She pulled out the long scroll and unfurled it to begin.

“Jason Argil...”

It took the better part of thirty minutes to work her way through the list. They had a rather large list, in addition to twenty Goblin students that had come in. The Goblins had wanted to send over three-hundred but Minerva was very stringent, that the most they could take on for the first couple years, until the Houses could be enlarged, was twenty. The next year was promising to be even larger than this year's, so even twenty was going to be a stressful time.

The Goblins were not exactly cordial. They had agreed to send their young ones, as the idea of an eighty year old being having to room and take classes with a teenager would just be too much. The whole idea behind having the Goblins come to Hogwarts was to intermesh wizard and goblin cultures. The best way for that to happen was for the young to grow up together, until the generations of mistrust finally died away. But the young Goblins showed every indication that they were going to be most troublesome. They looked around the Hall and at the other students with a disdainful sneer, already causing some of the older students' wand hands to begin twitching. They also refused to come on the Hogwarts Express, or take the boat ride over the lake. These were old traditions that had been ignored, and Hermione felt it was bad luck indeed to do so.

She finally got through the roll call and all the students had found their houses, fifteen of the Goblins had gone into Slytherin, the rest into Ravenclaw, and folded the scroll back up. She was about to head to the table when a polite cough caused her to look up and see one last student standing. Much to the amusement of the students. The young girl seemed a tad older than the others that were sorted, and she was blushing furiously at the chattering laughs of the other students. She had raven black hair that reached halfway down her back and large brown eyes that were so dark, they were almost black. She had a slight tan, showing a healthy love of the outdoors and some skin on her bones that showed she was well fed and taken care

of. A gleam of intelligence and casualty in her stance bespoke of a worldly life beyond most children her age.

Hermione approached the girl with a warm smile to ease the situation. She felt devastated that she had forgotten a student and was the cause of this young girl's embarrassment. "Did I not call your name dear?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am." the dark haired beauty replied, looking at her shyly.

"Oh I am so sorry!" she hurried to unroll the scroll. She glanced down the list two times, but had noted that every name had already been magically crossed off as she read them out loud.

"I won't be on the list ma'am." The girl spoke up. "I'm a transfer student from the States." she held out a form that was attached to a thick folder. "I was told to give you this. I was supposed to meet someone by the gates, but no one ever showed. I am hope I didn't offend anyone, but I came in and saw you with the students, so I followed."

Hermione blinked a bit then closed her eyes and covered them with her hand. She had forgotten. She had completely forgotten. She had been supposed to finish the paperwork at the start of the summer, but with the vacation she had put it off and forgotten about it.

"You are Lily O'Dowell? The second year?" The girl nodded.

"I am sorry dear. I was supposed to send someone to get you." She decided to fib a bit. "We have had some trouble organizing the term and I forgot. Will you forgive me?" The girl just grinned a bit.

"Oh that's alright ma'am. At least now I will be remembered by the other students." The girl leaned in a bit and whispered. "You can always make it up to me by ignoring any detentions I might get."

Hermione had to quickly stifle a laugh. She like the confidence and easy going manner of this young girl immediately. "I'm afraid," her

voice filled with mirth, “that, that won’t be possible, but it was a nice try.” Lily just pouted a bit and gave a dramatic sigh.

“Oh well. It was worth a try.” She winked at Hermione.

“Well let’s get your sorted shall we.” She was rewarded with a sharp, business-like nod, and together they walked over to the stool and Lily took a seat. Hermione placed the crumbled old hat on her head and stepped back.

“Well! Well! Well!” the hat exclaimed loudly, causing everyone to jump. “You must give my regards to your father! He was a most troublesome placement.” Hermione blinked and looked over to Minerva, who was watching with interest. The Headmistress just gave a shrug and continued to watch. It had said nothing else for several seconds before making its sort.

“Gryffindor!” it finally shouted, and the Hall sounded in applause, especially from the always welcoming House of Godric. Lily jumped up and handed the hat over to Hermione and ran over to the table. She watched the girl trot a bit and take a seat, to immediately introduce herself to her year-mates. Hermione had the sudden inkling, as she saw the girl at the table, that she knew her. That she had seen her once before, but couldn’t place where. It was right there at the tip of her mind, but kept sliding away. She gave a mental shrug and flipped the hat into the air. With a flick of the wand it vanished with a small puff of smoke, back to its shelf. She headed back and took a seat to the left of Minerva.

“Interesting wouldn’t you say Mrs. Weasley?” McGonagall said softly, leaning over a bit. Hermione sighed in exasperation.

“Hermione, Minerva. For heaven’s sake call me Hermione! And what was so interesting?”

“You didn’t recognize that young lady?” She shook her head.

“And I supposed you do?” Minerva just gave a small secretive smile and leaned back away to talk with Flitwick. Hermione raised a brow and looked over the table at the raven haired girl. This was an

intriguing mystery that she would have to solve at some point. She tapped a finger against her chin as she took a sip of pumpkin juice.

“Just who are you Lily O’Dowell?” She whispered to herself. As if hearing her, the girl turned and met her eyes. Giving a secretive smile she winked at Hermione.

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## Chapter 4

### Lily's Secret

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“Caeles Contego!” Ginny cried out for, what seemed like, the hundredth time that day. Once again her wand vibrated and an eggshell-white shield materialized in front of her. Once again it held, for but a breath, and then unraveled; bits of wild magic, from the failed spell, lashing out in front of her. Ginny stomped her foot in a small tantrum and sent a glare over at her brother, who was currently lounging insolently in a chair, while flipping through a spell book. Her glare then focused on the items behind him. A table full of books. Books as dusty as her parent’s attic, and as thick as her brother’s skull. It was like her N.E.W.T preparations all over again. Only on things she had never learned. Hermione was responsible for this, she decided to her satisfaction. The bookworm sister-in-law had pulled out every single book of defensive and offensive spells she could lay her hands on, and dropped them unceremoniously at Ginny’s feet.

For two weeks, Ginny had plunged and plodded along. Nicking spells from this book and that. And for two weeks she felt as if she was getting no where. This latest spell, deemed the ‘Heavenly Shield’, was giving her no end of trouble. Ron and Hermione both insisted that she had to perfect this spell if she hoped to stand a chance in the Merlin Maze. The Tournament. She didn’t know why she had insisted in signing up for the thing. Once moment they were talking about it, and the next she had decided she would show Eric that she was more than a pretty face. That she was a powerful witch to be reckoned with. Almost every day her stubborn lover tried to persuade her to withdrawal from the thing, and every day she grew more determined to show him she could do it. Sadly, everyday she stumbled on a roadblock with an advanced spell that would leave her with a headache when she went to bed.

“Ron,” she said in exasperation, “there must be something I am missing. The inflictions in the incantation must be wrong.” Her brother just rolled his eyes.

“You’ve already said that about nine times Gin. I’ll tell you what I told you all those other times. If the incantation is wrong then your wand would do nothing. It’s your focus. You lose it every time your wand starts vibrating. It’s supposed to vibrate Ginny. It’s one of the strongest shields there is. It get’s stronger the longer you hold it. The vibrations are cause more and more of your magic is traveling through the wand. Ignore the vibrations and you’ll do fine.”

Ginny huffed, and for the ninth time, refused to believe him. The Protegus charm never vibrated, so why should this spell, which was, after all, just a more advanced form of that school taught spell. It was hard to get back into the mind set of learning new magic. When she had started she soon discovered she had forgotten a great deal. Slowly things were coming back to her, but not fast enough in her opinion. It took her an entire day to produce a Patronus. After seven years the attempt had exhausted her a great deal.

She walked over to her lazy brother, who had nothing to do after getting fired a couple of weeks ago. She still couldn’t wrap her brain around that revelation. Ron had come by her flat in a rant. Screaming and raving about how he was set up and framed, and how the Ministry was a bunch of back stabbing hypocrites. She had to agree with him, that it was impossible to keep track and prevent someone from getting a copy of a Wizard’s signature. Sooner or later someone was bound to find an old paper, or note, or letter. The Ministry just wanted to look like it was doing something. Old ways, under new faces.

Hermione had come by to help comfort her husband and together that had turned his rage towards something else. Later that night Hermione had secretly confided in Ginny that she was happy he was fired. That he wouldn’t be in so much danger anymore, and that he could finally join a Quidditch team like he wanted. Ginny had to agree there. There had been dozens of times over the years that Ron had almost died, or had vanished without a trace for several days. Only to turn up with some malcontent witch or wizard bloodied and tired. Times like those were stressful for the whole family. Their mother was a raving lunatic usually.



Picking up a leg of chicken from a platter of food, she bit into it rather savagely and took a seat next to him. "I feel like I'm back at Hogwarts and cramming for my N.E.." she muttered. Ron scoffed a bit and gave her a childish grin.

"Yeah! They determined the rest of your life! This just determines if you're going to live it!" Ginny blinked at that. Ron kept hinting that if she didn't take this seriously that she could die. She knew of some of the magical creatures, but from what Ron was saying, there was much more and much worse that she would face. She tried to get details from him, but the Ministry had cast a charm on him after his discharge that prevented him from speaking about the Maze.

"Look, Ginny," Ron said, interrupting her thoughts, "You know I can't tell you the details, but if you're going to do this thing, you need to put everything else out of your mind. Only think about the magic. Forget about Quidditch, me, Eric; everything else, except getting through this alive. If you don't learn this stuff: You. Will. Die. So stop pitching a fit about how hard this is. If this is too hard for you, then you have no business going into that maze."

Ginny turned her attention towards the ground while she thought through what her brother said. He had been very patient with her the past couple of weeks. The fact that he lost it now meant that he wasn't over exaggerating the danger. She had been thinking about the Tri-Wizard Tournament but with more creatures and more people. Maybe there were other things in there that she had never dreamed of. She knew she was talented. Hell she almost had the grades to begin and internship with the Aurors. If her sixth year hadn't have been so bad, under the guidance of the Carrows, she most likely would have been in the top five of her class. She may not have ever even considered becoming an Auror, but she had the talent to do such. At least she felt that she did. So maybe it was time for her to find that spark she had during her sixth year. She needed to talk to Eric and let him know.

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She stepped through the floo and into his spacious living room. Being a power player in the business of magical goods, Eric lived very well.

His home was on the outskirts of Edinburg. It was a sizable manor on top of a hill, surrounded by a rolling green pasture. Thick, high hedges and a strong, iron wrought fence, gave the magical home the privacy it needed from any curious muggles. In the back was a small ranch, which held four horses. One of them was hers. She loved horses, and admittedly it was one of the reasons she consented to a first date.

His house was richly furnished, but she always felt it was rather cold, with the stark white walls and tables of glass, and black leather furniture and blackthorn wood. Black and silver curtains decorated the windows and across the way from the fireplace was a large tapestry depicting one of the goblin wars. She had never asked which one. She hated that thing.

She stepped lightly into the hallway and looked around. "Eric?" she called out. Receiving no answer, she assumed he was in his den and made her way there. The den was on the other side of the house from the living room. An unusual arrangement she thought, from traditional architectural designs. As she drew close to the sliding door that was his den, she heard voices coming from the other side. The door was open slightly. Enough for her to see through. What she did see made her gasp.

Eric, her beloved, and one other man were in a rather heated argument. It wasn't so much the fight that had made her lose her breath; it was whom he was fighting with. She would always be able to pick him out in a crowd. Tall with pale chalky skin and a robe as black as magic could make. His straight platinum blond hair ran past his shoulders. An ideology to his father who was, thankfully, now dead. Draco Malfoy, a man who many believed, had picked up in his fathers foot steps and ran many nefarious operations in the Wizarding World.

If she had kept a cooler head, she might not have spoken up, but her shock was too complete as seeing a person she loathed in the den of her lover.

"Eric?" she said in a stunned and confused voice. The two broke off the fight immediately and looked over to her. Eric in irritation and

Dragon in sardonic amusement. Ginny unconsciously tucked a strand of her dark red hair behind an ear and looked back and forth between the two. Eric studied her for a moment before turning back to Draco.

"I am done speaking to you. Do not come by here again." He gave a look towards the blond that seemed to carry two meanings. Draco raised a single brow and his lip curled at an edge in that familiar sneer. He gave a dip of his head and brushed past Ginny without saying a word. Her eyes followed him as he walked away, heading towards the main living room and the fire place. When she turned back she saw Eric studying her with an odd expression. There was only one word for it. Calculating. She took a step towards him and frowned.

"Eric. I know that man. What was he doing here?" she asked in an irritable voice. She hated not knowing things, and the idea that her lover was involved with Draco brought forth the famous Weasley temper. Eric didn't say anything for a moment.

"I was not aware you made it a habit to listen in on other conversations Ginevra. Or to come by unannounced." His tone made her want to slap him. Everyone always called her Ginny except for him. In public he was always very formal and polite and used her full name. In private he spoke more tenderly and showed an intimate side. This was his public face and a scornful tone. The tone that he used when he thought that she was not behaving as a good witch should.

"Don't talk to me that way Eric. I don't deserve it! I've been coming around like this since a month after we started dating. Don't use that excuse now. Draco Malfoy. I know him Eric and he is no good, what so ever. What was he doing here?" She folded her arms under her chest and tapped her foot impatiently; waiting for an answer.

She could have sworn she saw a flash of something much less than friendly on his face, but it was gone so quick that she felt she was mistaken. Eric was a firm and disciplined man, but still gentle and kind. He would never look at her the way she had thought. She was probably just jumpy from seeing Malfoy, and thinking in terms of him.

"I'm sorry Ginny. You are right. It was wrong of me." he said as he stepped over towards her. "Will you forgive me?" He reached out and dragged a finger along her cheek. A gesture that always made her feel like she was something special to him.

"Always Eric." She relented with a smile. "But I still want to know what he was doing here. If my brother knew..." She broke off and gave a shake of her head.

"It's nothing so devious as you think. I found out that one of my clients was making some backroom bargains with Mr. Malfoy with some of my shipments. I broke contract with the client and he complained to Mr. Malfoy about the affair. Mr. Malfoy decided to come here and try to...persuade me to see his point of view. When you interrupted us I was just informing him that while my wealth was not as vast as his, my contacts and influence were more than enough to handle whatever he sent against me... and to strike back at his pocketbook if pushed too far."

Ginny felt very relieved and couldn't help but to grin at his explanation. "I bet he didn't like that. In school he always hated when someone stood up to him. I don't imagine that has changed much by now."

"He never responded since you walked in, but I gather you are correct. Worry not my dear, I can handle Draco Malfoy. Now tell me. What have I done to deserve such a brightening of the day by you?" he smiled that charming smile of his. A smile she felt could beat Lockhart's any day of the week. She cringed inwardly and tried to deflect the conversation for a bit. She looked him over and noticed the perfect opportunity. Eric hated to be dirty.

"Eric, you are covered with dust. I haven't seen you this dirty since I got you thrown from your horse." She reached out with her wand to clean it off for him, but he grabbed her wrist before she could give a flick.

"Don't worry about that dear Ginny. I hate to push you away, but I have a rather urgent meeting soon, so I really do need to know what I can do for you." She blinked a bit and gave a shrug, pocketing her wand when he let go of her hand.

"Well you see..." she took a breath and steeled herself. "I have to prepared for the Challenge in a couple of weeks. I've been working on my spell work, but I haven't the time to focus properly. I came to tell you that we can't see each other until after I get through the maze. If I want any chance at all, I have to devote all my time towards learning and mastering some new spells." She reached up and placed a finger to his lips as he was about to interrupt. "No Eric, please don't argue. I really need this. Please understand."

She let her eyes go wide and pleading towards her lover. Trying to convey her need through them. Eric looked down for a moment and set his lips into a thin line. That was never good. It grew worse when he shook his head.

"So I'm just going to be cast to the side, while you going chasing after a silly fantasy? Why are you doing this Ginny? This Maze contraption isn't a proper affair for a good young witch. We discussed this. I thought we agreed your gallivanting would be limited to the Quidditch pitch. Then you would retire and we could think about the future and children. Is this more important that me Ginny? Am I some challenge for you to beat, only to be left alone when a new one comes up?"

Ginny felt a keen despair at first and then a stifling anger at his words. A good young witch? Then he delivered those words 'to be left alone.' Was that what she was doing to him? She didn't think so. She chewed her lip trying to grasp at the words to make him understand.

"Eric. It isn't like that. You deserve a witch who is strong, someone who can think for herself and stand by your side during hard times. I know you care for me, but at times I don't think you really understand me. You aren't some game to me Eric. And this maze is important to me. All I am known for is my small contribution in the war, and my Quidditch skills. When I retire like we talked about, I want to do something worth while, and if I do good in this, or even better if I win, then it will open a lot of doors for me in the Ministry. Or maybe even Hogwarts."

Eric calmly took her hand that she had placed on his cheek and removed it. He looked down on her with angry eyes and then swept

past her into the cold desolate hallways of his manor, leaving her alone. Stunned and despairing at his cruelty.

“Eric! Wait!” she called out as he strode away. He half turned back to her.

“Go have your little fun with fame Ginevra. I might be waiting for you when you’re finished. I might not. I will have to think it over.” And with that he turned a corner to leave her in bitter tears. She completely forgot about Draco Malfoy in her despair.

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The bell rung and the students started to get up and stuff their belongings away. Hermione had to shout to get their attention before they fled towards their next class. “Your homework! Two feet of parchment on Lethifolds. How to spot them, their weaknesses and their strengths and how to defend against them. Due on Friday.”

The class groaned at the assignment, but they were used to Professor Weasley being a hard-lined teacher, and didn’t dare complain less they receive one of her famous rants about the importance of studying. This class filed out and Hermione began to arrange the classroom for her next students. With a couple deft flicks of her wrist, she arranged the desks in a large circle around the center of the room. She then went to her office and began to pull out a large object, roughly the size of a very large man. It was shrouded in a glowing white cloth that made people want to hum and sing just being within its radiance. Dragging the object along, with the use of her wand, she set it in the center of the room with the desks facing it. Then she went to the wand board and began writing her notes line by line. As she finished the words vanished. To be recalled later, line by line, at the tap of her wand.

It took about ten minutes, but the students finally arranged themselves outside her door. “Enter.” she said in a loud and firm voice. The door opened and the second year Gryffindor and Slytherin students made their way in. They paused at the site of the desks and the large rectangular object in the center. “Come on, sit down, we don’t have a lot of time and we have a lot to learn.” The students

rolled their eyes and began to find their seats. Gryffindor on one side and Slytherin on the other. No matter how hard the professors tried to get the houses to intermingle it always failed.

“Now class. Everyone put their books and wands away. I don’t want any panicked casting of spells today, and if your wands are close by someone is bound to throw some silly hex, and that would be very bad indeed.” She paused while the students complied and made her way into the center of the room, next to the object.

“Now don’t be afraid. The creature behind the cloth is under the strongest possible bindings. It won’t get loose and it took a great deal of effort to get the Ministry to send me one. Today second years, we will be discussing the strongest, and most deadly of all known dark creatures. The Dementor.” She flicked her wrist and the white shroud rose up to hover high into the air. Instantly a chill settled into the room and the students gasped and tried to back away in their desks. Everyone, Hermione included, shivered a bit and settled deeper into their robes.

The Dementor was trapped in a cage of white steel. Variations of the Patronus charm were etched into runes, running along every inch of the bars. The Dementor could not touch them without hurting itself. Nor could its vile weapon, that of causing despair, reach beyond the bars. A hand went up rather fast and Hermione was pleased to note that it was the young Lily. The girl was smart but didn’t speak much in class, or ask many questions.

“Yes Lily?”

“Professor, don’t the Dementors guard Azkaban?” the girl was chewing her lip, but Hermione smiled indulgently.

“Not anymore. After the second war of Voldemort, which we will begin discussing later this year, the Dementors were rounded up and thrown into a prison the Department of Mysteries had devised. During the war the Dementors showed their true nature and left the service of the Ministry to work for Voldemort. They killed a great many people and lost the rights of their freedom.”

“But Professor,” Lily spoke up again, “My Dad said they should have all been destroyed. That there was no place in the world for things like them. Why does the Ministry keep them around?”

“That’s a good question. I am afraid I don’t know the answer to that. There are very powerful spells that the Ministry has that could destroy them, but for reasons unknown they are content to allow the things to remain caged. Caged. That is the key word for today.” Hermione changed the subject slightly, not wanting to go into more detail of classified information. “The cage you see was devised by George Weasley, yes he is my brother-in-law.

“The only known spell that can affect and repel a Dementor is the Patronus Charm. Dementors feed and draw strength by attacking your memories and your feelings. They draw forth the worst memory you have and heighten it’s affect on you. Leaving you scared and unable to perform magic. A strong will can overcome its affect, but it is difficult.”

“The Patronus Charm is a personal talisman of magic. It is a creature birthed by your happiest memories, and it will dispel the Dementor’s effects and drive the creature away. The bar’s of this cage are etched in runes which mimic the effects of the Patronus, thus protecting you and keeping the creature caged, unable to escape.” Another hand was raised.

“Yes Mr. Langburrle?” she called on a dark haired Slytherin boy.

“Professor, wouldn’t a simple Finite Incantatum destroy the spells on the bars?” Hermione shook her head.

“Good question, but no. The spells are too strong for that spell to dispel them. It would take a powerful Wizard the better part of an hour to free it now.” Another hand was raised.

“Professor, what is your Patronus?” Before Hermione could reply Lily spoke up.

“An otter.” she said simply. The class, including Hermione, stared at her for a moment.



“Miss O’Dowell. Could you please tell me how you know what form my Patronus takes?” She didn’t like that the girl knew this, and let it be known, by the tone of her voice. The class waited with hushed anticipation at the potential conflict between student and teacher. Lily’s mouth worked soundlessly for a second.

“Well, ummm...You see, ummm...I read about it in Hogwarts, A History. About Dumbledore’s Army and Harry Potter teaching all of you the charm.” The girl smiled a bit, not knowing that Hermione could recite that book verbatim, having read it hundreds of times.

“Stay after class Miss O’Dowell. I don’t take kindly in being lied to. Now back to the lesson...”

The class was long and grueling for the students. Hermione drove home every single important fact and made sure that each and every student was taking proper notes. It was one of the reasons her students did so well. She took the time during class to make sure they all were noting down the correct points of the lessons. No students of hers had need to copy notes from some smarter girl constantly. As the class filed out she saw Lily slowly getting her things together. Once the other students had left she made her way hesitantly towards the stern faced Professor.

“You wanted to see me Professor?” Lily asked.

“There are no more classes for the day. Begin putting the desks back in order, by hand not magic. Then come see me in my office. It’s time we had a talk.” Lily nodded

“Yes Professor.” she said in a subdued voice. Hermione stood up and made her way to the office while the young girl began to work.

It was fifteen minutes later, while Hermione was reading some notes, that the knock came.

“Enter.” Lily came in, carrying her supplies. “Sit down.” Hermione said. Once Lily had settled herself into the cushioned seat Hermione began.

“Miss O’Dowell. The past two weeks since school began you have been a mystery to me. You know things that you shouldn’t. Things about me and the war that aren’t published anywhere. The lie you told me today, was one of those. I know Hogwarts, a History front to back and every sentence there in. Therefore, I know that my Patronus form, or the fact that Harry Potter taught us the spell, is not in those pages. Or anywhere else for that matter. I think it is time for you to explain yourself.” She folded her hands in front of her and pinned the young lady in her seat with a penetrating look.

Lily tried to admirably keep her composure, but was in danger of degenerating into a babbling mess. “Well Professor, It’s like this. You know, you’re pretty famous. Umm, yeah, my studies in America mentioned some things, like that. And you’re famous, so people are curious...umm.” It was babble of the most inane sort. Nothing coherent as she struggled to come up with some sort of story.

“All very interesting, but,” Hermione had perfected the famous McGonagall tone and look and it was working wonders on Lily. “You have yet to say anything and you need to start. Soon.” she ended the order with a snap. Lily took a deep breath and exhaled.

“My dad told me.” she whispered. Hermione’s eyes widened a bit and something clicked in her mind. Just as she was about to put it all together something seemed to fog over and her attention was directed elsewhere. She almost decided to let the young girl go, but her will and studious training in the magical arts wrenched her back on course. She gaped at the young girl and in a blink her wand was up and pointed at a suddenly frightened face.

“I think that’s about enough of that young lady. You really need to explain yourself. I can recognize the influence of an avoidance charm. It’s normally used on muggles or wizard residences, but I know it can be cast on a person. My patience has reached its limit. The use of such a spell on a member of Hogwarts faculty is grounds for detention. You will serve them for two weeks. Every night, including weekends you will report to me. Is this understood?” Hermione, who hated to be manipulated in any way, was not in the best of moods now. Lily jumped up and closed in on the desk, her hands outstretched and pleading.

"Professor, please don't! I want to tell you everything, but I can't! Give me a couple of weeks and I will tell you everything, but right now I can't!"

"You will have your two weeks. In detention."

"No! Professor, haven't you ever had to keep a secret no matter what? Haven't you wanted to tell someone something so badly, but you know things will go bad if you did. I'm protected by something called a Fidelus charm, or something like that, I can't tell you what you want. I didn't cast it, someone else did. Please don't punish me for something someone else did!"

Hermione didn't let her shock or worries show on her face, but her mind was working overtime trying to grasp and fit all the pieces into place. The mention of a Fidelus charm was the key. She knew that she recognized the girl from someplace. It wasn't an avoidance charm that was working on Hermione; it was a powerful charm on the girl that caused everyone to forget about her.

"I thought I knew you from some place. Your face is like fog. I keep trying to get a hold of the memory, but it keeps vanishing at my touch." Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose and looked Lily up and down, trying to come to a conclusion. "Very well. I won't pressure you to reveal what you are magically bound not to reveal. However, the detentions still stand. Two weeks, every night for an hour. Take up your grievance with whoever put that charm on you. It's an interesting variation, not as effective as say placing it on a home, but obviously effective in this case."

Lily's expression grew positively mutinous and she stamped her foot roughly on the stone floor. She sulked as she gathered up her things and prepared to leave.

"Where do you think you are going Miss. O'Dowell? You have detention to serve." Lily gapped at her like she was a purple chicken singing in a muggle play. Hermione pulled out a bunch of sheets from her drawer and held them out for the girl. "Five hundred lines please. 'I will not lie to a Hogwarts Professor.'" She felt bad as Lily's eyes

grew glassy and a few tears dripped, but her mind was set. If the only way to find out what was going on was to get the charm on the girl lifted, then she would do what she had to do. And currently Lily was the only link. Use Lily to get the caster to revoke the spell.

Lily sullenly took the papers and moved over to the desk on the side of the room. She took out a quill and some ink and began the assignment. It should take her the better part of the hour to do. Hermione watched for a minute and then turned her attention towards some essays she had to grade.

She looked up an hour later to see the young girl still scratching away at the lines. She had about two hundred of them done so far. It was enough for one night. "That's enough Lily." The girl looked up gratefully and flexed her aching hand. "Be here tomorrow at six and every night there after. Sleep well." Lily gave a nod and made her way out of the office to head back to her house. Once she was gone Hermione threw some floo powder into her fireplace and stuck her head through.

"Minerva? Are you there?" it took a moment, but the wizened headmistress finally appeared at the top of the steps in the office. She slowly descended in her graceful walk and headed to meet Hermione.

"What do you need Hermione, I was just going to a meeting with the Board."

"It won't take long Minerva; I just wanted to ask you a question. Have you ever heard of the Fidelus charm being cast on a person and not a place?" McGonagall's eyes lit up a bit and she smiled.

"I see you discovered Miss O'Dowell's little secret." Hermione gave a shocked look at her mentor.

"You knew?" Minerva nodded.

"Oh yes. I knew the moment I laid eyes on her. I recognized her almost immediately. I dare say the caster probably did not account for

the Headmaster's office granting protection from the Fidelus Mnemosis charm."

"Oh thank god, so you can tell me then." Hermione smiled with relief. She wouldn't have to punish Lily now.

"I'm afraid not Mrs. Weasley." Hermione's smile dropped. "It is not my secret to reveal and I do not want to offend the person who has gone to great lengths to protect Miss. O'Dowell. I dare say that they will call on you soon enough. Just be patient."

"Be patient you say! You are not the one under the effect of some obscure charm. It's maddening. Knowing something, but not being 'allowed' to remember it." she huffed out.

"Well, yes there is that I guess. Still I won't tell you. Let's let it be a surprise for a bit. Now I really have to get to that meeting. Is there anything else?" Hermione recognized the dismissal and shook her head. As she sat in her office later that night she came to a conclusion. Give up on trying to find out who Lily O'Dowell was. It would stop the head-aches.

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That weekend the Weasley family gathered for its usually family feast. The Burrow was always crowded for the gatherings, but no one could dare think of a more happy and homely place for such things. During the summer they would have the feast outdoors, but as September came to a close and the beginnings of the autumn winds began to chill the air, they moved it into the house.

It was always a festive affair, with plenty of laughing and George pulling double time with his antics, in memory of Fred everyone assumed. Katie Bell, George's fiancée for the better half of five years, sat to his left and was chatting amiably with Ginny about the Quidditch season. Ron was poking at his food and every now and then stuffing his never-ending-mouth with some potatoes or pork. He was watching his sister from the corner of his eye. She seemed happy, but there were a couple of lines and a tense set of her shoulders that told him she was exhausted and none too happy at the

moment. Ron, of course, did not have the foresight or sensitivity to approach her on the subject in private.

“Oi! Gin.” She turned to him. “Where’s Eric at? He usually shows up for the dinner!” The table silenced a bit and looked at the youngest of the Weasley children. Ginny pursed her lips and took a sip of some pumpkin juice.

“He...isn’t coming for awhile.”

“Oh dear, why ever not?” Molly asked.

“We had a small fight. Nothing big, but I needed some time to myself to focus on my studies, and he wasn’t too happy about that. We will make up, don’t worry mum. It’s just a little tiff.” The rest of the table nodded a bit and smile sympathetically, which Ginny hated.

“How did that deal go with America?” Ron asked, propping softly. “About the broom sticks?” Ginny shrugged a bit.

“That fell through, but he got some other deal with someone else. Transporting some kind of experimental floo powder from Egypt. He’s had to wait a bit on approval from the Ministry, but someone finally granted it. Made a bundle I think.” Ron grunted a bit and turned to his food.

“Didn’t know floo powder was a big business. Not that expensive. Are you sure it was floo powder?” Ginny shrugged.

“That’s what he said, when I asked. I don’t know. Why are you asking Ron?” Ron just gave her a shrug in return.

“No reason. Just curious.”

“How is the hunt for a job going son?” their father butted in, trying to diffuse Ginny’s attention from Ron’s questions. Ron schooled his expression to look unhappy and dark.

“Haven’t really looked yet. The cannon’s don’t have a spot open. Was hoping to wait till the end of October, when the trading and cuts begin

for the next season. If a spot opens up I am going to try out. If not, then George here offered me a spot in the shop. Can't say that appeals to me all that much, no offense George." The comedian of a brother grinned from down the table and raised a glass of fire whiskey.

"No problem O' Brother O' mine. You can make up for it when it comes time for cleaning out the spell resistant cauldrons. By hand." He grinned at the scowling Ron as the table erupted in laughter.

"But what about money?" Molly asked her son.

"Oh that's no problem mum." Hermione said; defending her embarrassed husband. "We have a lot saved up and I have a decent pay from the school. We can survive up to seven months on our savings. We will be fine."

"Well," Molly didn't look too sure, "If you need anything just let us know. Arthur and I have been able to save up a bit and can help you two out."

"Mum!" Ron cried out. "Honestly, were fine. You and dad were planning on that vacation next summer. Don't use it on us! Go to whatever that place was you said."

"Alaska." Arthur reminded them. "Just imagine it! Snow as tall as you or me all year round! A Cabin in the woods, snow everywhere, deer and bears outside. Snowed in for a month!"

"Why are you going some place cold where you won't be able to leave a cabin for a month? What are you going to do? Throw snow balls at each other?" After their parents told them Ron wished he had not asked that question.

"Oh I am sure your mother and I will find something to occupy our time. Right Molly?" he took her hand and grinned rather lecherously. Sounds of fake gagging and people trying to cover their ears and eyes erupted from the cramped space. The rest of the dinner went smoothly. A great family affair, full of laughter and love.

No one noticed the eyes hidden by a dark hood, hovering just out of sight and watching through a window. The eyes drank in their faces slow and studied the burrow carefully before walking away and up the hill to vanish with a 'pop'.

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A/N - There you go. The reason for why Ginny and Hermione don't remember Lily.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. The tournament is closing in soon and things will begin to speed up.



## Chapter 5

### Backroom Bribes

The foot steps on the cold, hard, cavern floor kept pace with the insistent drip of water from the stalactites above. A soft echo, bouncing along the cavernous walls, made it sound like the soft shuffling of hundreds of feet. New torches lined the path, burning with an eerie blue fire that made the place seem more ominous. The hems of the silver robes dragged, just barely, along the damp floor as their owner approached the table. It was wide and long, thick and hard. Polished to a white sheen that reflected the azure color the torches gave off. Like the shimmering rise of an afternoon sky, bathed in half formed clouds.

The man pulled out the hardwood chair and sat with a regal demeanor. For an instant the light of the table lit the dark depths of his hood, showing the glimpse of dark hair and a slight tan. It was hard to tell as the setting could offer illusions as readily as truth. Around the table in six other chairs sat other men. Each of them dressed in the richly fashioned silver robes with sapphire blue runes sewn into the hems. The runes were old. From the days of Persia, when the vast empire held sway and, the rule of Wizards and Witches called on sorcerous powers of antiquity. From the days when spells were fashioned from belief and will rather than words and wands. It was a past long forgotten and desired by many. None more so than the seven seated at this table.

"I am sorry to have kept you all waiting." said the man who had recently arrived. "I believed I was being followed and had to lose those who were trailing me." His voice was refined and deep.

"You are certain you were not followed here?" a silken voice spoke from the head of the table. An undertone of threat could be identified, one that spoke of the consequences if the answer was not pleasing.

"I was forced to invoke a Simularicrum, they were very determined. There was no other way." There was a pregnant silence as the other five heads turned to stare towards the leader. One fitted with golden robes and black runes. Finally the Leader nodded.

"The move was wise. A pity the need to reveal such powers, but wise as you are needed here tonight." With that the golden clad figure reached towards a stand next to him, lifted a thick book and placed it on the table before him. Slim fingers, white as snow from powdered chalk, left the folds of the sleeves and opened the book towards the back.

"We have finally recovered the Second Grimoire." he paused, waiting for the exclamations of delight and satisfaction that sounded much louder and elevated from the echoes, to subside. "It was costly. The traps the thief had laid cost us the lives of Pervell and Chauncey, and Manfred may never regain his sanity. Worthwhile, but costly."

"Can we enact the spell with the book?" another of the robes figures asked from the recesses of his hood. The leader shook his head.

"No. We still need the primer, which is located within the first book. However, with this we can identify our mysterious thief."

"Can we use it to find him?"

"No, but we can worry about that once we know who he is. Before each of you is a bowl of oak, aged three hundred years. I will need you all to bleed into the bowl." The seven mysterious figures removed the ceremonial daggers from their sides and cut open their palms. Several grunted at the sharp pain, but none wavered as they held the bleeding hands over the bowl. After a good handful of blood was in each bowl the Leader halted their actions. Several waves of some wands and muttering of spells healed the injuries.

"These old spells do not require the use of wands. Cup your hands within the blood and raise them above you. Do not worry when it runs. Then incant the following spell in unison. 'Cum Indegeio Sumo Agnitio', 'Cum Vis Sumo Sapientia'. Then lower your hands and blow gently towards the center of the table. Focus all your thoughts and power on the desire to know who stole the book. Do not waver or the spell will fail. Begin."

As one the seven figures dipped their hands into the bowl and cupped a generous portion of their blood. They raised their cupped hands over their heads; rivets of the crimson liquid ran down their arms to stain the silver threads. As one they invoked the blood magic.

“Cum Indegeio Sumo Agnitio! Cum Vis Sumo Sapientia!” they cried out in loud firm voices. The blood in their hands glowed a deep maroon, but shown a dark purple in the blue light of the torches. They brought their hands towards them and blew gently.

The blood seemed to gain a life of its own and flew from their hands in thick sludging streams towards the center. The seven floating rivers met with black sparks and pooled into a red sphere. The sphere slowly began to distort and form a face. A mouth and cheeks seems to etch from it's depths as it floated above the table. The blood began to define hair, and the color slowly began to change. Suddenly it began to lose focus and become less defined, as if it was losing the identity of the thief.

“He knows! He is fighting us!” one of the silver clad men cried out.

“Stand firm!” said the leader. “Concentrate. Do not falter or we will lose this chance!” Again they grew silent and poured all their concentration into the spell. Beads of sweat soon dripped from most of the faces. Several groaned and swayed under the stress. The sphere seemed to change into the shape of a castle. One of the figures grunted and leaned forward a bit, his blood stained hands gripping the white table tightly. Again the sphere seemed to destabilize and almost break apart.

“I...I can't...hold...” the smallest of the seven gasped out and slowly he buckled and slipped out of his chair to crash to the floor. The rest ignored him and tried even harder to take his place. The blood changed shape one final time then with a crack and a flash of light the blood powdered and blew away with a breeze. All except for the Leader slumped forward and rested their heads in their palms. Nothing was said for a long while as they regained their strength. Finally the smallest wizard, who had collapsed, regained his consciousness and slid once more into his seat.

“What does it mean?” one of them asked. The Leader sat looking at the table.

“I do not know. The images were too vague. I can think of nothing that would give us the identity of the thief from them. His protections were too strong for the spell to break.”

“I know who it is.” Said the figure that had arrived at the meeting last. The others turned towards him eagerly. “If half of what I have heard about him is true, then he is more formidable than any of us suspected.”

“Who?” said the leader, leaning forward eagerly. “Speak his name and we shall test his power.” It was delivered with malice and promise.

“Harry Potter.”

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It was the first Hogsmead trip of the year and the students were excited. The weather was rather pleasant for the outing. It had a slight chill as the autumn months closed in, but not so cold as to require anything more than a simple cloak. In two days the Grand Merlin Maze would open and some of the greatest Witches and Wizards in Europe would compete in a magical challenge only rivaled by the World Dueling Championship. There was an excited buzz in the air as the students made their way to the market town of Hogsmead. Only one thing could take their focus away from the Maze and that was the Grand Opening of Perfect Protections. The clandestine business that supplied the Ministry and other Wealthy buyers with powerful and mysterious magic in the forms of rings, necklaces and any other type of jewelry or personal apparel you could think of. In fact. That opening was the only reason Hermione had decided to come herself into the town.

It promised to be both a fun and enlightening experience. Ron was going to meet her at the 'Three Broomsticks' before heading over to the shop. Being a former Auror he was naturally intrigued by the sudden shift in the businesses' marketing direction. They both knew that at least one D.M.L.E investigator would be there under cover. The ownership of the company and its assets were so obscure and murky that the Ministry had even considered passing a law just for that business to find out who ran it. Only the fear of losing its revolutionary items kept them at bay. Kingsley told Ron one time. If a snake isn't biting you, don't go and provoke it. Hermione and Ron both had to agree with him there. Anyone who could make a necklace that prevented the Imperius Curse from affecting a person was obviously not out to undermine the Ministry.

The Department of Mysteries, of course, was afire with the desire to get their hands on the knowledge of whoever made the items, but even their attempts had failed. Fudge, who had somehow pulled enough favors and bribes to fill an important Ministry position, was the current head of the Department. His appointment was the major reason Hermione had left. After his operations for 'acquiring' the plans of the various pieces of magic had failed Fudge arrived at his office one day to find a note on his desk. No one knew how someone had penetrated so deep into the Department, nor did anyone know what the note said, but the next day Fudge had pulled a 180 and stopped all investigations into Perfect Protections. Kingsley had hinted to the couple one time at an Order meeting, that the note said that some of Fudge's more interesting actions during his term as Minister for Magic would be revealed if he didn't back down. Whatever it was had worked, and now the man was playing the role of servile department head to the letter.

Despite everything, something still nagged at Hermione's curious nature. There were too many odd things happening in Hogwarts lately and they all started when Perfect Protections entered Hogsmead. She was very skeptical about the timing. The latest episode was all of the ghosts had been locked in a room for several days. That of course isn't supposed to be possible with ghosts which made it all the more curious. There was a huge row between Nearly-Headless Nick, the Grey Lady, and the Bloody Baron. Apparently some things got resolved because people could see the Grey Lady and the Bloody

Baron wandering the halls together at night. People assumed the thing was a prank on the ghosts, but Hermione suspected it was to get the ghosts out of the way for several days.

The students scattered when the group finally made it to Hogsmead, and Hermione walked briskly towards her destination. The streets were packed from tourists. The various inns and homes, filled to the brim with the coming events. The store owners were ecstatic, and praised Kingsley for the Maze with every Knut they made. She turned down the street that held some of the more upscale homes and expensive businesses and saw the crowd. Her steps faltered slightly, but she continued on. The store had been open since the morning and it was now the after noon, but still the crowd was large. There must have been at least fifty or sixty people just waiting outside. Such a crowd should keep the students away, who wouldn't waste their precious time standing in a line.

She wrapped her cloak tighter around her and waited at the end. Every now and then she would see someone leave the store with a black velvet bag and an uncertain smile of their face. A line started to form behind her and when she looked back, she saw that the line had grown to at least a hundred people. Hermione suspected it was the crowd that drew more people. When the line moved enough to allow her to see through the window she saw a sign that made her want to laugh at the cleverness.

'For security and Ministry regulations only five persons are allowed in the shop at one time. Thank you for your understanding of the dangers the shop harbors.'

Hermione knew there were no regulations about the number of people allowed in the building. The sign was a ploy to allow the owner to give their undivided attention to the customers, as well as to draw more people with a crowd. It was marvelous. The front window was clouded over with an amusing charm. Several Items could be seen on display. A glittering necklace with three emeralds set in a thin chain of bronze. A bracelet of platinum with a teardrop sapphire and then various simple rings with different engravings and simple stones. It was designed to show that the store could service both the

extremely wealthy and the middle class. It was another good business move.

Finally after waiting nearly an hour she was at the head of the line and a couple left the building, allowing her and a gentleman behind her to enter. When she entered she was immediately impressed and stopped to gaze around the place. The floor was hard wood, but had a thin cushioning charm on it. The walls were an off white with navy blue trim, simple, but tasteful. There were dozens of glass cases around the room, each holding various items and shelves lined the walls with more merchandise. Some were locked away and some were open to touching. The purchasing counter was made of oak and holly. An odd pairing of woods, if she ever saw one. Behind the counter was a door that led to the back. Even from here she could tell that there were some strong warding spells on that door.

She started to walk around the store, nodding quietly to the other patrons. The place had a hushed almost sacred quality to it. It made you afraid to speak too loud and disturb the silence. She liked it a lot. She inspected some of the items. A ring that gave you a slight glamour to appear more beautiful. A necklace that protected you from most poisons. A brooch that would defend against fire and fire based spells. The description on that one even promised to protect you against Fiendfyre. That made her eyes widen and she reached out hesitantly to touch the item.

"Ah yes, that one was particularly hard to make." A hushed voice from behind her caused her to jump almost a foot. She turned around hastily to face the speaker with a hand over her fluttering heart. What she saw almost made her whip out her wand and throw a hex in defense. It was a figure dressed all in black. There was a hood over his face and what was obviously an obfuscation charm of some sort hiding his features. He looked almost like a Death Eater without the mask. She stayed her wand and took a closer appraising look. He was not very tall, but not short as well. She knew it was a man from the sound of his voice. She could see the fingers from the sleeves; they were long, but strong and rough, not thin and elegant. The hands had a slightly pale cast, but there was still a tan to them, which was fading in the England weather.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I am the manager of Perfect Protections. I am pleased to meet you Professor Weasley." he held out his hand. She frowned slightly at the use of her name, but she was not without a small amount of recognition from her face in the papers. She took the hand gingerly and turned her lips up from the frown.

"Apology accepted Mr....?"

"You can call me...hmmm...Mr. Dudders. It is not my real name of course, but in my profession it would be unwise to reveal it."

"Why, if you don't mind me asking."

"There are many people of a most unsavory nature that would wish me and my family harmed if they found out who I was. My work with the Ministry, and the Aurors, has earned me a number of enemies who would like nothing more than to see my inventions disappear." Hermione nodded, it made sense.

"This brooch. It protects against Fiendfyre. That seems almost impossible considering the very nature of the curse." The man nodded and she could sense a smile from the hidden face.

"You are correct. It is impossible for total protection. The brooch will protect you for a short time, but I would not recommend standing in the stuff if you know what I mean. It will give you the time to think calmly and escape, or if you are particularly adept to dispel it. One rarely sees Fiendfyre however. I added that bit to make it more of a seller. The unexpected is what usually kills." Hermione had to agree to that.

"So!" his voice lost that elderly quality of speaking and fell into a more boyish enthusiasm. "What can I get for you? I made everything here, but I do take requests. If you need say, protections from most school jinxes from pranksters, I have a number of items that will do. If you need a trinket that will help you find wayward students, I can help with that as well." The curious shop owner rocked back and forth on his heels. Hermione could almost see a youthful expression of exuberance from his body language alone. Hermione saw from the



corner of her eye that another customer was waiting to be served and nodded to the woman.

“Let me look around some more. I am sure your other patrons are eager to buy something.” The hood swiveled to look at the woman and gave Hermione a nod.

“As you wish Professor Weasley. Enjoy the store and take as long as you wish. I’ll stop by once you’re ready.” And with a flutter of long thick robes he turned and strode over to the woman with an arm outstretched. Hermione took a moment to examine the brooch once more, marveling at the idea of something so potent. Whoever he was Mr. Dudders was a remarkable proficient artificer.

Turning her attention to other objects she let herself wander some more, watching the shop owner carefully. It seemed he had no end of energy; not unlike a certain twin. He grew solemn with a new widow, and then he whispered like a co-conspirator with a man who was doing a poor job trying to hid his face. With a Hogwarts student he laughed and inspired ideas of mischief and safety from Peeves. He had a personality for every type of person. He could hide as anyone, she realized. He held a mask over himself that could turn into any type of person he wished. Hermione thought that maybe the Ministry should take the chance at losing his items and incurring his wrath and just find out who he was and what his intentions were.

A ring caught her attention and she paused in her wanderings and picked up the crisp white card that described its abilities. The hand writing was remarkably poor.

Ring of Sia – named after the ancient Egyptian God of Knowledge, this remarkable ring is a scholar’s dream. Excellent for searching a book or tome for specific phrases or words, this ring, when worn, will automatically guide you towards the knowledge you seek within the pages. If the information you seek is not there, then the ring will not function. Inquire for pricing.

Hermione’s breathing grew shallow and she wet her lips as she read the card over and over again. She eventually placed it down and took a long look at the ring, which was encased in spell shielded glass. It

had a curious translucent green tint to the band, made from some mineral or another. It was set with an onyx and in gold dust on the large black stone was an ancient rune that meant – ‘to know’. Of all the things she had thought to find, something this magnificent was not on the list. Her fingers itched to hold the ring and she found her hands clammy and clenching over and over again, trying to force the feeling out. She wanted it.

She looked over to see the, now magnificent Mr. Dudders just finishing up with a large surly wizard with a long graying mustache. She bounced a bit on the balls of her feet, eager to purchase the ring. Her original reasons for coming here had vanished from her excited mind. To her satisfaction the owner noticed her impatience and, with brisk strides, was before her in a heart beat.

“Ah, Professor! Have found something you like?” he asked in that boyish inquisitive tone that, if she could have seen his face, would have found very charming and attractive.

“Please. Call me Hermione Mr. Dudders; I swear that name rings a bell with me.” She added as an afterthought. “And yes I have found something. This ring here.” She pointed towards the green and black piece. “How exactly, does it work?” She tried to keep the excitement out of her voice, but failed. She knew it would cost her when it came to pricing.

“Hmm.” the mysterious man muttered. “Are you sure that is what you want...Hermione?”

She squirmed under her robes at the way he said her name. “I did not say I wanted it Mr. Dudders. I was just curious as to how it worked is all.”

“Ah. I see, I see. Well, it’s rather easy. You slip the ring on, place you hand over what ever book or scroll you are looking through and focus on what you need. You will feel a small compulsion driver your hand till it finds what you seek. If it isn’t in the book then you won’t feel the pull.”

“Yes, but what charms and spells are used on it?” The man gave a quiet laugh at her question and waggled his finger at her.

“You’re asking for my secrets Hermione. From what I’ve heard you’re one of the smartest witches in England. If I told you the spells then you could make one on your own.”

She gave a small sigh and bit her lip as she looked at the ring once more. “How much?” she asked in an eager whisper. She looked back over towards his obscured face and waited for an answer. He didn’t move for almost a full minute. She grew uneasy under, what she was certain was an intense scrutiny.

“A favor Hermione Granger Weasley. A favor.” His voice was soft and firm. She narrowed her eyes slightly at the use of her full and maiden name. The way he spoke sounded almost like a spider having caught the fly. She suddenly worried that the man might be a Legilimens and threw up her Occumancy shields. She detected no shift in his stance that he noticed what she had done. Still, she kept her shields in place and pondered hard the price.

“Favors are dangerous and costly things Mr. Dudders.”

“So is knowledge and the ability to find it. How many times in your life have you struggled to find an answer in time? How many times have you come up short, or too late to make a difference?” She realized this man had some insight into her life and troubles. Either he had already used Legilimancy on her, or they knew each other.

“I would need to know the favor up front. There won’t be any sudden requests years down the road.” she stated firmly.

“Of course. Come back this evening after I close up the shop. I will have the ring ready for you and the required favor.” She hesitated and gave a small nod. She started to leave the shop and turned back one last time to look at him. He was still watching her under that inky, shifting, blackness that was his face. She gave a small troubled frown and swept out the door. The crowd was even longer than before and she shook her head. She made her way over to the Three

Broomsticks, her feet taking her automatically as she dwelled in her thoughts.

This Mr. Dudders was a powerful, mysterious, charming, frightening, confident, conundrum of a wizard. She wanted to deny this 'favor' of his and pay with galleons, but she was sure he wouldn't sell. And she wanted that ring badly. That ring could save her hours and hours of research. It was a marvel that she had to have. She knew that she was taking a big risk and stepping into the murky depths of conspiracy, but for some reason she was willing to take the chance. For her, the thought of that ring on her finger was almost orgasmic. She could envision herself in front of a table with piles of books, going through them rapidly for what she wanted. Her research and personal experiments would leap frog.

When she stepped into the pub she spotted Ron over at a corner booth. He gave her a wave and she made her way through the crowd, nodding a couple times to some Hogwarts students. She gave her husband a kiss on the cheek and slid in across from him.

"Well?" He asked.

"Oh you wouldn't believe it Ron. He is a genius. There are items in that shop that I didn't think was possible to make. There is this ring, I'm going to get later that will allow me to-"

"A ring?" Ron interrupted and scowled. "Mione, you weren't supposed to go shopping. You were supposed to find out about him and if he's dangerous or not." She waved him off impatiently.

"Honestly Ron. Anyone who can make the things that he does is dangerous. But, this ring Ron. It's amazing-"

"Hermione!" Ron interrupted again with an exasperated sigh. She glared at him and very primly picked at her sleeves.

"Very well. I couldn't see who he was. He was disguised and wouldn't reveal his real name. He said it was because the enemies of the Ministry would attack his family for helping the Aurors with his work. A reasonable precaution I think. I didn't notice anything dangerous

there, but he did hint that, if requested specially, he would make something. Or try to anyways.” She gave a shrug. “The place is spelled with so much security and protection that it would take even Bill some time to take them all down. He just seems like a paranoid shop owner, that’s entirely too smart.”

Ron grunted and looked off into the distance. “I don’t like it.” He said after a moment. Hermione reached out and took his hand.

“Ron. You’re not an Auror anymore sweetheart. Let them handle it. Can’t we, for once after 14 years, have some peace and quiet? Let it go.” She hated to see him like this. Still moping around like he was an Auror and refusing to put it behind him. He hated working with George, but he was still running around like he was on an investigation. She suspected he was after whoever had framed him.

Ron grew stiff and looked at as if they were back in Hogwarts, during their early years. “Thank you Mrs. Know-it-all. My dim mind must have forgotten the obvious.” He stood up and started to leave.

“Ron!” she called out to apologize, but he ignored her and continued out the door. She sighed and dropped her face in her hands. The prat could get angry and start a fight over the smallest things.

“Professor?” She looked up to see a concerned student by the table. “Are you ok?” the girl asked.

“Yes Samantha, I’m ok. Just some boy trouble. All us girls have it now and then.” The girl giggled.

“Oh yes, there is this Hufflepuff boy who gives me trouble too.” The girl blushed as she realized she was talking about boys with one of her teachers. Hermione smiled and motioned towards the seat across from her.

“Sit down and tell me about it. I could use some girl talk, if you know what I mean.” The girl giggled again and slipped into the booth. They spent the next hour drinking butter beer and pumpkin juice. A couple of other older girls joined them and they spent the time talking about boys and how weird they could be. Hermione related to them about

what Ron was like during school and how clueless he was. The other girls laughed and shook their head. All of them agreed that boys, while needed, were too much trouble to put up with at times.

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The sun was setting over Hogsmead as Hermione made her way down the street paved with white brick. She was nervous. She didn't know what to expect, but feared the worst and had made sure to cast several protective charms about her person before leaving the castle. Hogsmead twilights had always seemed creepy to Hermione, with her muggle roots. As if the thriving wizard town was closing its eyes and monsters were waiting in the shadows. Just waiting for night to descend and release to their hungers.

She neared the shop and saw that the crowds were gone. The grand opening sign was still up, and probably would be for close to a week. She walked to the door and tried to peer through the window, but the same fog charms as earlier wouldn't let her. She noticed that one of the display items was missing. The very expensive bracelet. Most likely just purchased because hundreds of people were admiring it and the buyer wanted people to know that they had the wealth to get it. She raised her hand and tapped her wand on the magical ringer.

It took him a moment, but eventually the wooden door swung open and the mysterious Mr. Dudders stood before her.

"Ah, Hermione. You made it. I'm glad. Come in, come in." He moved aside and she stepped through. A brief glance around showed that many of the shelves were empty of their products now. He must have made a small fortune in one day.

"I see business was good for you Mr. Dudders."

"Huh? Oh yes it was. I didn't expect the people to buy so much. I'm gonna have to go into some of my older stash to fill the shelves until I can make some more of the newer products. That or take nothing but requests. I don't want to do that. As it is, I'm probably going to have to hire some help. I never expected it to take off like this."

Hermione followed him as he led the way towards the counter. He took out his wand and tapped four times on the door that was powerfully warded. It swung inward to reveal a brightly lit room beyond.

"Follow me please," he said to her. She hesitated at the threshold, but the thought of that ring once more pushed her into peril and she stepped through. It was a pleasant work room. There was a bench on the far wall with several instruments she recognized from her time as an Unspeakable. Her eyebrows rose a bit at one of them, but she didn't comment. She saw several raw ore in a box, and along a shelf on a wall, there was arranged a multitude of gemstones, from very expensive to common quartz. The rug was a thick maroon and the walls a pleasant golden color. A coffee table of gold oak held a couple of books that Hermione didn't recognize. A lush deep thinking chair stood by the table with a hand lamp hovering over it. Most likely were he sat to read the books she saw.

On the other wall was a small library of rare and expensive volumes. Just a cursory examination showed her that he had an impressive collection. 'Obscure monsters and How to Tame Them', 'Protections for the Unfortunate', 'Advanced Auror Guide Volume forty-two', and to her horror, 'Magik Most Evil'. The last was separated from the rest and she could see the pulsing of some sort of deadly ward over it. The fact that he had it, made her nervous and apprehensive, but the knowledge that he warded it from a common thief releasing it to the public made her feel a little better. She had to broach the topic of the book however.

"Mr. Dudders. I mean no offence, but that book on your shelf," she pointed at the vile tome. "It's on the restricted list of books available to the public. It is a most...unwholesome bit of literature. Why do you have it?"

The man chuckled a bit and walked over to his library. He waved his wand over the volume three times and tapped it twice. The warding flickered away and he pulled it off the shelf.

"This book, Mrs. Weasley, lets me know what is out there. It speaks of some of the worst pieces of dark magic there is. With this

knowledge I can create some items that ward against many dangerous spells and items. Someone, much wiser than me told me once, 'know your enemy.' I took that to heart. I know a lot about dark magic. Because I know so much I can help people who don't. Are you satisfied?"

Hermione thought it over a bit and gave a nod. "You're right. It was wrong of me to pass judgment. You can't stop what you don't know about. Your pieces that stop the Imperius curse are remarkable. If the Ministry had them back when Voldemort was around, he never would have gained so much power or taken over."

"Yes, it's like everyone says. If I knew then what I know now..." the sentence trailed off with a sardonic chuckle.

"You were involved in the war then?"

"Oh yes. I was right in the thick of things. I lost friends and family, like most people. Voldemort took almost everything I held dear and the Ministry the rest."

"The Ministry?" Hermione exclaimed. "Why help them then?" He shrugged.

"They are changing. Just look at the differences. Goblin and Centaur rights. House-elf freedoms. There is still a lot of corruption, but the Ministry isn't what it used to be. If I can help keep it free from evil then I've done something worth-while in my life. But listen to me going on about my life. You are here for your ring, and a ring you'll get."

Hermione wanted to ask more, like what the Ministry did to him, but he obviously wanted to get to business. She gave him a brisk nod and walked over to where he waited. Mr. Dudders took out a black velvet box and opened it for her. Inside was the band that had captivated her thoughts all day. It was more beautiful up close than it was in the case. Her hand reached out, but she paused to look at the man in appeal. He gave her a nod of approval and, in shaking fingers, she took the ring from the white silk cloth that held it. It was smooth, with gentle curves. The edges that she could see on the band gave it



a false rough look. She inspected it closely. She looked at every grove and grain in the gem and mineral. It was flawless.

“Amazing.” she whispered. “Stunning.” He nodded in agreement.

“I spent three long weeks on the ring.” he told her. “Not to brag, but it’s an amazing piece of magic.” Hermione could only agree.

“Now for the price.” She bit her lip and looked up at him waiting. He moved to a cabinet and opened it up. He took out a long necklace with an amulet set at the bottom. The amulet was gold with a large emerald set in the middle. She could see swirls of magic contained within. Walking over to her he held it out.

“I understand that you have a sister-in-law that will be partaking in the upcoming Grand Merlin Maze. I want you to give this to her to wear. This is the price.”

Hermione immediately set the ring back down. “No.” She stated firmly. Endangering her self for a piece of magic was one thing, but endangering family was another.

“Hermio-” he started to say.

“No. I don’t entirely trust you Mr. Dudders, or whatever your real name is. I won’t put family at risk.” They stared at each other for long moments and then he finally spoke, when he did his voice was like a smoothing and calm melody. She felt her inhibitions slowly degrade and a fog seemed to steel over her mind.

“This is the price of knowledge Hermione Granger Weasley. You have nothing to fear for your sister-in-law. It’s just a little thing really. You get a ring and she gets an amulet. Everyone gets something and no one loses. When she walks into the maze everything will be fine. Please agree to this Hermione. You want the ring don’t you?”

She nodded slightly, almost swaying with his tranquil voice. “Then take the ring and hold the necklace.” She did as ordered. He grasped the hand that held the necklace in his own. “Do you Hermione

Granger Weasley agree to give them necklace to Ginevra Molly Weasley and make sure that she wears it during the Tournament?”

“Yes.” she whispered. A soft white glow enveloped her and the item in question. Slowly with halting steps she left the room without saying another word and started the long trek back towards Hogwarts. Eventually the fog of her mind wore off, but she never gave a moments thought to the events that transpired in the back room of Perfect Protections. She marveled over the ring and was eager to test it out. Her other hand held the necklace for Ginny tightly in her hand.

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The twelve silver garbed wizards met their leader later that night. They arranged themselves around the white table in the large cavern.

“I have called you here once again, because there is a small hitch in our plans. Someone witnessed a meeting they should not have. While it could be innocent, it could lead to trouble later on in our operation. We must remove her from the equation. The witch in question will be participating in the Tournament two days hence. I have made arrangements that will insure her silence.” The gold clad figure turned towards one of his larger compatriots. “I trust this will not be a problem?”

“No.” the man said. “While annoying, she is too free spirited for my tastes. I can always find another to sate my thirsts.” The group chuckled.

“Good.” the spidery voice of the leader said. “Then in the Tournament Ginevra Weasley will die, and with her death this...Harry Potter, will have no choice but to come into the open and play into our hands.”

“Are you sure she will die?” another asked.

“Yes, I made the arrangements earlier this evening. She will not survive.” He once more turned the large figure in silver. “Are you sure you are ok with this? We could always leave it to you, to take care of.” The man shook his head and pulled back his hood to wipe some dampness from his forehead.

“She is nothing more to me, than a moment’s diversion.” said Eric O’Soule. “The sooner the better.”

Elsewhere a certain red headed young witch tossed in her sleep, troubled by dreams of betrayal.

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A/N - Thank you again for the reviews. Next chapter the Grand Merlin Maze begins.

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## Chapter 6

### The Grand Merlin Maze

Ginny was frantically skimming through the notes she had made during her studies. Taking the time for a last minute review of the spells she had memorized. The one thing she wished she had time to do though, was practice some dueling with Ron. He refused when she asked him however. Claiming that dueling would hinder her in this type of contest. That she would get too much into the mind set of a one on one battle and not think of it in terms of survival, but of spell work. She had a whole slew of battle spells now. The time to herself had helped her focus, even though she was very lonely and couldn't wait to spend some time with Eric. The very handsome and ardent Eric. She shivered a bit, just thinking about what he would do to her once they made up after their little tiff. She was looking forward to it.

"Ginny! You're going to be late!" Hermione called out from her living room. Earlier Hermione had stopped by and they had talked a bit, giving a few pointers on some spells. She had also given Ginny a very lovely amulet. She said it would protect her during the Tournament. Ginny had to check the rules, but it was stated that spelled items were allowed. When she placed it over her head the amulet flashed a bit and she felt a slight tingling. Hermione assured her that it was ok and that she shouldn't take it off, no matter what.

"I'm coming!" she shouted out. She went over her uniform that was provided for the event and made sure all her papers were in order. Everything seemed to be fine so she left her bedroom to meet her brainy friend.

"Is everything in order?" Hermione started in on her. "Is your uniform correct? Do you have all of your papers?" Ginny rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Yes, Hermione. I'm all set. Where's Ron?" Hermione scowled at the question.

“He’s being a prat as usual. I told him that he needed to look to his future, rather than skulking around like an Auror and he went into his usual brooding mood. He’ll be there Gin. He won’t miss this.”

“I hope so. It wouldn’t be right without him in the stands, cheering me on.”

“Ginny?” They both turned to see Molly’s face in the floo.

“Hi Mum.” Ginny greeted her mother. “I’m all set; we were just about to head to the Tournament.

“Ginny dear, are you sure you want to do this? It’s so dangerous, you could be hurt. Or killed!” Ginny graced her mother with a patient smile. She had been waiting for this. Truth be told, she was surprised her mother made it this long before voicing her concerns.

“I’ll be fine Mum. If I do well in this, or better, if I win, I’ll be set for life.” she flicked a bang from her eyes. “Any job I want I could get. It’s just a shame they won’t let Ron participate.”

“No it isn’t.” Hermione objected. “I wouldn’t allow him to enter that death trap even if Kingsley let him.” Ginny, wanted to giggle, but stifled her laughter.

“Well anyway mum, I need to get going. I’ll see everyone there ok?”

“Ok dear. I still worry about this though.”

“Mum, I’ll be fine.” Ginny said in exasperation, her patience dwindling with her nerves. “I’ve spent over a month preparing. Ron, George, Hermione and Dad all helped me out, plus I’m no slouch with a wand if you remember. Now I really have to get going.” Her mother finally agreed and said her good-byes. Hermione gave her a hug and flooded away, leaving her alone in her flat.

Once alone she lost some of her poise and pressed a hand to her stomach. Truth be told, she wasn’t sure she should be doing this either. There was going to be over thirty other witches and wizards in the Maze. Who was she to go up against some of the best and

brightest that Wizarding Europe had to offer? She shook away her jitters and did one final check of her papers and uniform. When she had determined everything was in order she raised her wand, and with a twist of her body she apparated through time and space towards the gathering grounds.

The Ministry had set up a private apparation grounds for the contestants and officials. When she arrived she saw that most of them had already arrived and were speaking with Ministry representatives. She made her way towards the registration table and spoke with a sour faced man, who liked like he wanted to be in the stands making bets rather than checking wands and identifications.

"Name?" he asked.

"Weasley, Ginevra." He went over his list and nodded.

"Wand please?" He held out his hand and she handed it over. He placed it on one of the Ministry scales and ran a few tests to check the last twelve or so spells that she had cast. Satisfied he handed it back to her and took her papers. He looked them over carefully and finally nodded.

"Everything is in order Miss. Weasley. Speak to Jhonus Franklin other there and he will go over the details." he pointed towards a short little man with a beard past his shoulders. She gave the registrar her thanks and walked over to her mediator.

"Mr. Franklin?" she asked as she approached.

"Ginevra Weasley?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Oh good you arrived. I was starting to wonder if you had backed out. Now we don't have any time for small talk. So listen closely. Each contestant will start at a different point. You have two hours to make it to the center of the maze and apparate safely back to the goal. Remember. Don't splinch yourself. If you do, it counts as a loss. Any spells, but the Unforgivables, or those that are made for the express

purpose of killing, are allowed. If you want to throw a bone removing curse at someone, feel free. If at any time you are unable to continue raise your wand and fire sparks into the air. You are not allowed to destroy the walls of the Maze to hasten your way through. There are protections to prevent that of course, but I'm just making you aware in case you had any tricks up your sleeve. Brooms are not allowed. If you have any shrunk or hid on your person, do not bring it inside or you will be disqualified. As in the rules you need to acquire three golden wands to win. Don't try to transfigure something into one. The real wands are spelled so we can tell the difference. Any questions?"

"Yes. Where is the goal that we need to apperated to? We need to see it, to get an idea of where to go."

"It's the announcement square, where you all will be introduced. Anything else?" She shook her head. "Well then. Let's get going it's time." He strode away from her quickly, forcing her to half trot to keep up with him. She saw the other wizards doing the same, and they were all heading to the large doors that into the stadium.

She wasn't prepared for the sheer size and grandeur of the Maze. It was being held in the largest Quidditch pitch in England. They seemed, however, to have enlarged it to twice its normal size. The stands surrounding the maze were easily close to twenty stories high packed to the brim with people. Magical monitors were displayed high in the air so that the spectators could watch the contestants as they battled their way through the Maze. The Maze itself was a green and black mass of vegetation and stone. Far into the center she saw a giant tree several stories tall swaying in the wind. Something seemed odd about it even at this distance. It looked sickly and decayed. She squinted her eyes to try and get a better image and gasped in recognition. 'Oh dear Merlin,' she thought. 'What have I got myself into?'

"A Blood Tree..." she muttered in dismay. Almost all the contestants were staring hard at the Tree as well. She heard several others utter some rather colorful curses and almost all looked back towards the doors they just walked through. Probably thinking about backing out. Blood Trees were very rare and very dangerous. They were sentient predators that could problem solve almost as well as a grown human.

They had long vines from every branch that could wrap around a bull and crush it in seconds. What was worse is that the vines were coated in a paralysis poison that could render their prey immobile in less than a minute. Its very roots were said to be able to come out of the ground and attack and ensnare its victims. Its bark was as hard as stone and its leaves had tiny thorns that released a digestive substance. It was invulnerable to fire and extreme cold. The only saving grace was its fruit. In the highest branches there was an apple like fruit that provided protection from the tree's poisons. "It also caused you to give off a scent that made the tree think you weren't there. Of course most people died when trying to extract the fruit.

They finally arrived at the goal of the Maze and lined up in a single file. Minister Shacklebot stood at a podium surrounded by a few key members of the various Wizarding presses. He was garbed in a rather ostentatious purple robe with white highlights. Ginny thought he was trying too hard to look stately and powerful to the other countries representatives. He cleared his voice and pressed his wand to his throat.

"Greetings and welcome to the first ever Grand Merlin Maze!" The crowd cheered and clapped, drowning out any further words he might have spoken. It took a minute, but finally the 40,000 people in attendance quieted enough for him to continue.

"In this contest of magical skill, over thirty witches and wizards will pit their knowledge and skill against some of the most dangerous charms, curses and magical creatures there are. And the prize, an egg! A very special egg. An egg from one of the rare and highly sought after birds. A phoenix!" He whipped off a black covering to behold a large and beautiful egg. It was golden and sat on a bed of hot coals. It shown with an inner light that radiated from deep inside. It was roughly the size of a large softball and had spidery lines running over its surface.

Ginny was mesmerized by the sight. She couldn't take her eyes off of it. So entranced was she, by the egg, that she almost missed her name being called by the Minister. She came out of her stupor and plastered a smile on her face and waved to the crowd. The noise of boisterous by her many fans in attendance.



“And thus I present to you’re Merlin Challengers!” Shacklebot cried out to some more cheering and stomping of feet. “There is a small change of plans however. Due to the influence of a local store a new rule must go into effect before we begin. Many of our foreign magical brethren have expressed concern over the powerful items provided to locals by the new business Perfect Protections. We have reviewed the facts and have determined that the items do in fact give an unfair advantage over many contestants. For this reason any challengers are forbidden to take any spelled items into the Maze.”

The Minister turned to the contestants. “I am sorry, but if you could kindly remove any of the afore mentioned items before we begin?” several men rushed forward with steal-me-not bags. Everyone began to remove a great many rings, sneak-o-scopes and various other oddities from their persons. Ginny shrugged a bit and removed the amulet that Hermione had given her and placed it in her own separate bag that had been provided for her. She wasn’t sure what it did, but she felt confident to get through without it. Finally all the items were collected and the Minister once more addressed the crowd.

“And finally we can begin! Several Ministry officials will direct the contestants to their designated starting points and the Maze will open!”

“Minister!” A loud voice cried out, and a man stepped down from the lower stands. “One more contestant if you please!”

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Hermione and the Weasleys finally got settled into their seats. As family of one of the contestants they were allowed premium seating in the upper stands, closest to the magical monitors that flew in the sky.

“So, how do you think our tempest of a sister will do?” George asked.

“Good.” she told him confidently. “I don’t know if she will win, but she has a shot. The only thing I’m really worried about is the Blood Tree. I can’t believe they grew one of those things just for the tournament. It’s an abomination of nature.”

“I agree. I had to tangle with one of ‘em a few years back for a product. Needed the fruit. Took me a good week to get the stuff. I ended the product line later on, didn’t want to face one of the things again.” the twin grinned over at her. “But cheer up. Gin might be able to subdue it with her mouth alone. Girl can scold like our Mum.” Angela elbowed his ribs gently at the remark.

Hermione was hoping for one of his jokes to lighten the mood, but George didn’t have that laugh like he used to. He still made the best practical jokes, but something in him died when they lost Fred in the war. He tried to keep his humor, but just couldn’t seem to find that spark. He was a grim reminder of the many losses suffered.

She felt Ron put his arm around her and look at her for a moment. She met his eyes and gave him her secret smile that was for him alone. In that wordless moment Ron knew she had forgiven his behavior and gave her a peck on the lips. She snuggled into his embrace.

“Good evening.” a deep voice spoke. The family looked over to see Eric taking a seat.

“Eric!” Molly cried out. “I’m glad you came. Ginny would be happy you’re here.” He gave an odd little smile and nodded to the Matron of the large family.

“I would not miss it. I hope she does well and does not get injured. I still don’t agree with it, but she has pointed out that she is her own woman. Although, I still have reservations about her reasons. She is most stubborn, and perhaps I pushed her into it by asking her not to participate.”

“Asking her?” Ron scowled. “From what I heard, you ordered her like a house-elf.”

"A difference in perspective."

"Now, now." Arthur interrupted the budding argument. "We need to support her and not criticize."

"I couldn't agree more!" yet another voice spoke up. Everyone turned around to find the source of the new comer. Hermione blinked at the site.

"Mr. Dudders? What on earth are you doing here?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Dudders?" Ron whispered in her ear. She could hear his barely contained mirth and elbowed him discreetly, keeping her face impassive. The mysterious artificer took a seat above everyone and folded his hands in his lap. He was not in the thick black robe he wore the other day. Today he was in a marvelous maroon cloth, which had two gold griffins facing each other sewn into the breast. Every now and then one of the pictures would shift and flap a wing.

"I couldn't miss this, now could I? It's going to be great! All kinds of..." his voice trailed off. "Please tell me that isn't a Blood Tree in the center of the maze."

"It is," The entire family replied in unison.

"They are nuts." The hooded man exclaimed. "I hope they harvested plenty of the fruit from that-that thing before hand. Otherwise they're gonna be dragging off a lot of bodies." Molly gave a small sob at the news and dabbed at a tear.

"Don't worry about your daughter Mrs. Weasley. Hermione purchased a necklace from my shop the other day. It will keep her save from poisons, petrification and ... other things." Molly's mood did a complete 180 and she was suddenly beaming at the man.

"Oh bless you! I don't think we have been introduced though." She glanced at Hermione, who flushed at the silent rebuke.

"Oh, forgive me." she said. "Everyone this is Mr. Dudders, proprietor of Perfect Protections; the company that's been supplying the Aurors with protective items. He just opened a branch in Hogsmead." Everyone took a moment to shake hands with the hooded figure. To Hermione's embarrassment she noticed that Ron gave his rather reluctantly.

"So you're the one that saved my son's life Mr. Dudders?" Molly asked.

"I wouldn't know about that Mrs. Weasley. I just made the things, I didn't hand them out. I don't really deserve the credit."

"Oh nonsense. A lot of good people would have died in that vampire fiasco eight months ago, if it wasn't for your items."

"Nah. I'm sure the Aurors took the items into account. They would have acted differently if they didn't have them. All it did was guard their backs some, and make their job easier. Please don't throw the credit to me. I don't deserve."

"Well, if you insist." Everyone could tell that Molly was just being polite and really thought the man was a miracle worker. Her thoughts weren't far from the truth.

Eric scrutinized the man carefully. "Mr. Dudders?" The hooded turned towards him. "I've heard a great deal about your products. I happen to run a transportation company that specialized in magic goods. Perhaps after this we could discuss some business. I have contacts in many places that can help acquire rare items. I'm sure it could be profitable for both of us."

The man under the brilliant maroon robe didn't say anything for a moment. "I think we could work together Mr. O'Soule. Can you perhaps get a hold of some powdered manicore venom, and frozen Naga spleen?"

"The powdered venom, yes. The spleen...will take some work. Nagas mostly nest in the Himalayas, very hard stuff to get a hold of."

“Well if you could snatch those for me we can begin a lucrative deal and move on the really hard things. If you can’t...” Dudders shrugged and Eric knew it was a one time shot at getting a foot hold with the company.

“I’ll get a shipment for you. I’ll send out some owls later tonight.”

“Oh! Here they come.” Hermione exclaimed, and everyone looked toward one of the monitors to see the great double doors of the stadium open up and the challengers walk through. Ginny was near the end and had a look of slight awe as she looked towards the maze. Soon it changed to fear as she saw the Blood Tree in the distance. They saw her and the other contestants glance back as if having seconds thoughts, before moving forward and lining up in front of the Minister.

The Minister’s voice rang out loud across the changed pitch, announcing the Grand Merlin Maze.

“I wonder why the Ministry decided to hold this stupid thing.” Mr. Dudders spoke up.

“It’s a statement to the world.” Hermione said. “They are telling everyone that they are stronger than they were before the war. They set all this up in about two months time, no one died doing it, and they were able to get a phoenix egg and can part with it. It tells the other countries that England is strong, wealthy, and can meet almost anything that challenges it. I don’t like the Maze, but it’s a perfect political tool to reestablish England’s prestige in the magical community.” Everyone thought over her explanation a bit while they listened to the Minister announce each challenger.

“So you think the Ministry could handle a real challenge and crisis now?” Dudders asked her suddenly. Hermione nodded.

“Yes. The Minister now has a better trained law enforcement department, better protections to prevent corruption and infiltration, and the support of other non-humans. Even if it came to another war, they are now prepared to handle it.”

“That is...good to know.” Eric piped in. Hermione thought he had a rather fake smile plastered on his face, but she pushed it out of her mind, attributing it to Ron’s paranoia affecting her. “Hmmm something seems to be happening.”

They all watched as the Minister read a paper and addressed the crowd once more.

“There is a small change of plans however.” the Minister said in a loud voice. “Due to the influence of a local store a new rule must go into effect before we begin. Many of our foreign magical brethren have expressed concerns over the powerful items provided to locals by the new business Perfect Protections. We have reviewed the facts and have determined that the items do in fact, give an unfair advantage over many contestants. For this reason any challengers are forbidden to take any spelled items into the Maze.”

“WHAT?!” Mr. Dudders shot to his feet and his voice shook with fury. “Of all the stupidity!” Ron laughed.

“Looks like you’re a little too good for your own good Mr. Dudders.” he said in a slightly smug voice. Mr. Dudders rounded on him and pointed a finger.

“Fool! The necklace! Ginny will be helpless without it! I didn’t go to all the trouble of making the thing for her protection, just to see some greedy bureaucrat have her throw it away because it threatens his pocketbook!”

Ron and, well everyone, frowned and looked at him in suspicion and accusation. “Alright! Enough is enough.” Ron growled. “You talk about Ginny like you know her. You give her a necklace, Hermione a ring and you just show up in a booth reserved for us alone. Just who the bloody hell are you?”

Mr. Dudders however, ignored Ron and started to pace back and forth in the stand muttering to him self. “Damn Shacklebot. This ruins everything. What to do, what to do.”

“Hey! Are you listening to me? Don’t you ignore me to wankering sod!” Ron pulled out his wand and aimed it at the man. Mr. Dudders finally stopped pacing and shook his head and sighed.

“I’ve no choice. I’ve got to enter the Maze as well.” George and Ron both laughed at the announcement. Everyone else, but Eric, was gaping in confusion at this rather dramatic display.

“You can’t enter. You didn’t register, they won’t let you in.” Ron told him sternly.

“We will see about that. Everyone, I’m very sorry about the deception, but Ginny is in danger because of me and I can’t sit here and do nothing. I will explain everything later tonight at the Burrow.”

“Now just wait one blasted moment!” but it was too late. With a very graceful turn of his body Mr. Dudders had apparated away. “Now what the hell was that about!”

They couldn’t begin to discuss it as a loud voice echoed throughout the pitch. “Minister! One more contestant if you please!” The Monitors all focused on a man stepping out of the lower stands. Some Aurors move in to stop them, but the Minister waved them away.

“I am sorry sir, but signs ups are closed.” The man’s hood fell away and the entire stadium fell to quiet in an instant. Not even a bird chipped in the oppressive silence.

“Not even for Harry Potter?”

It was but for a breath before it began. As one the entire crowd, and every Witch and Wizard who watched, or listened across the wireless, exploded in a roaring cacophony of delight. The thunderous sound rocked the stadium and washed over the figures below. It deafened the ears and moved the air into wind; the united voice was so powerful. People tried to surge forward to lift up the Boy-Who-Lived. Their hope and savior. Their ‘second coming’. The Aurors and officials threw up shields and strained to keep them back. Still the roar of the crowd kept coming.

It began with the voice of a child. Then his parents. Then those people around them until it swelled with a crescendo; moving from stand to stand in a harmonic chant.

“Har-Ry, Har-Ry, Har-Ry!” The crows stomped their feet with the words. The concussion of the united populous vibrated the very ground.

Hermione gripped Ron’s arm tightly and Molly started to cry with joy behind them. Ron stood flabbergasted with his mouth wide open. Eric sat stock still and watched with monitor with penetrating eyes. Arthur was beaming and clapping his hands, his eyes brimming with unshared joy. George started to laugh like a little boy and pounded his feet as he held his stomach, bowled over.

“George Weasley!” Molly scolded. “That’s Harry you’re laughing at!”

“I know Mum, but don’t you see! Harry is going in there to protect Ginny. But who is going to protect him from her?!” He started to laugh again and Molly put a hand over her mouth.

“Oh dear.” she muttered behind her hand.

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Ginny’s world narrow towards the handsome face that was walking towards the Minister. She heard not the roar of the crowd or the curses of the officials. She saw not the uncomfortable shuffling of her fellow contestants. All she saw was Harry, and all she heard was the sound of blood rushing through her head and the frantic thrumming of her heart.

‘Harry is here.’ she thought. Taking in his face. He was more handsome than she remembered and her legs went weak at the sight. His hair was short and slightly spiked. He still had his glasses, but they were thin and added to the attributes of his face, rather than



distracting them. He was wearing magnificent robes of a shiny maroon with two griffins on the front. It suited him so perfectly.

'Harry is here.' she thought again in her stupor, and slowly her giddy, confused feelings, changed into something else. 'Harry is here.' she growled low in her throat and her face twisted into something angry and ugly. Her wand twitched in her hand and a few stray sparks leapt from the end. She hated him. She wanted to curse him, to see him on the ground, writhing in the same pain that he left her in. His dazzling and powerful green eyes met hers for an instant and he flinched and looked away. How dare he ignore her? How dare he leave her for so long, and how dare he come back now? When her life was settled and she had a wonderful relationship with a man.

She couldn't think properly and she felt her world spinning. She couldn't breathe she realized! She tried to summon the air into her lungs, but they wouldn't work. She swayed a bit on her feet and then she felt herself falling and darkness descended.

She felt herself coming to awareness. First the blessed air on her face and then the cold ground under her. She heard someone muttering to her and she opened her eyes and blinked. Then the sounds of the crowd rushed over her and she winced to cover her ears. She saw a man leaning over her looking concerned. As her awareness focused she could make out his words.

"Miss Weasley? Miss Weasley? Are you alright?"

"What-What happened?" she asked.

"You fainted Miss Weasley. Are you ok? We should withdraw you from the Maze. You're in no condition to enter!"

"No!" she told him fiercely. "I'm fine, just had a bit of a shock."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." she struggled to her feet and brushed herself off. Her eyes searched for the dark hair of her lost love and found him speaking to

Minister Shacklebot. "I wouldn't miss this chance for all the galleons in Gringotts." The man looked at her uncertainly and then shuffled off.

Ginny licked her lips as she watched Harry move away from the Minister. Her eyes pinned and studied every step he took with a death glare. She knew, that he knew, she was watching and glaring at him. He was purposely avoiding her eyes and moved to stand at the other end of the contestants, as far from her as possible. She ground her teeth. The prize no longer mattered to her. She would find him in the Maze now. She would make him PAY, for what he had done.

The Minister finally finished consulting with his advisors after speaking with Harry and, once more, placed his wand at his throat. "Attention Please!" He had to wait several moments for the crowd to die down. "With special consideration and the status of Harry Potter, we have agreed to let him compete in the maze." Another cheer drowned him out. "With this the Maze is ready to begin! The contestants will be directed to their positions and in moments the Maze will open."

Shacklebot nodded to a man off to the side and an official began handing out port keys to everyone. Ginny took hers, but still kept her eyes on the dark haired man down the line. A few seconds later she felt a tug at her navel and went spinning off with the port key. She found herself surrounded by high hedges and in front of her was a black iron gate. Beyond the bars she saw a tunnel of vegetation and a dangerous gloom.

Her mind was reeling. She was about to enter a life threatening situation and she couldn't stop thinking about Harry and what he was doing there. Where had he been all this time? Why choose now to show his face? She growled the questions away and took some deep calming breaths. If she wanted to meet up with him in the maze, she first had to survive; and charging recklessly into the tunnel in front of her, would be a sure fire way to kill her quickly.

She closed her eyes and pictured the burrow. She thought of the gnomes in the gardens and the dirt path. Her father's shed and the kitchen that was constantly cooking something. Slowly her heart

settled and her mind focused. When she opened her eyes she saw the gate glowing a pale blue and suddenly swung open.

“Begin!” a voice thundered through the air.

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A/N - And there we go. Harry's dramatic return to the Wizarding world. Gah! I dread having to write Harry and Ginny's reunion. It's going to be a real pain to get it right. Well I hope you are pleased with his return. Until next chapter.

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## Chapter 7

### Into the Depths

"Begin!" a voice thundered through the air. Ginny took a deep breath and tapped the top of her head with her wand. Her skin took on a yellow glassy sheen and hardened slightly. The charm would help protect her from cuts and scraps that would normally harm her. It wouldn't protect her from say a long fall or a blade, but it would prevent bruising and such from dodging and what not. With the enchantment in place she stepped through the gate and heard it swing shut behind her.

She would be stupid to try and rush through this. She suspected some of the other contestants were running head long into danger, but they probably had the skills to protect themselves better. Ginny had to play this out safe and win by her wits and not her wand. An image of a handsome face and green eyes swam before her and she angrily shook her head, banishing the vision. She would get her chance. She knew she would.

Looking ahead down the dark gloomy path she saw it branch out into a 'T'. The ground was rough with gravel imbedded into the dirt. It would be hard on her feet, but gave better traction than wet grass. She brandished her wand and sent out a Patronus. While mostly vapor and mist, the being still had some substance and any break in its form might reveal a spell or an obstacle. Sure enough at the end of the path she saw the silver horse split as it went through a trip wire spell trap. It was a simple and crude thing, but Ron drilled into her that the Aurors loved to use the old stuff and gave her a heads up on that account. With growing confidence she started forward at a trot and flicked her wand dispelling the spell wire.

At the intersection she looked left and right. Both paths seemed to go on a long ways, curving slightly into a mysterious bend. She decided to go right and sent her Patronus several steps ahead of her. It would be her ward against the gloom of the Maze; fear and uncertainty could kill her here, and her horse gave her the confidence she needed. Every now and then she would fire out a finite or a spell trigger at the walls and ground, looking for any traps, but so far it

seemed empty and easy. When she came to a dead end she saw a small hole in the wall and went through to see another path running parallel to the way she came. She closed her eyes momentarily when she heard a hissing sound behind her. She stepped forward and turned around to see what her foolishness had just wrought on her. Thankfully it wasn't the snake that she feared it was, but instead saw a weird green mist flowing from the edges of the archway she had stepped through. It was rapidly expanding and inching towards her. Fearfully she took a couple steps back, but the mist seemed to gather speed. Tendrils of the creepy substance licked the air and reached for her. More and more seemed to permeate the air and expand into a cloud so thick she couldn't see through it anymore.

In her panic she forgot to concentrate on her Patronus and it faded away, but she hardly noticed. She slashed upward with her wand and cast a wind buffeting hex. A strong breeze met the cloud, but it was so heavy that it barely paused in its rush towards her. She had no choice, but to turn and run. She smooth lope steps and good health from her exercise she started to breathe with her steps, so as not to over exert herself too early. She risked a glance behind her and gasped and stumbled at seeing that the cloud was right behind her, catching up quickly.

"You've got to be kidding me! Go away!" she snapped in futility at the magic. "Shoo!" Of course it ignored her and was one several yards away by now. She needed to figure out what this thing could do if it touched her. She grabbed hold of a knotted piece of old vine from the wall and ripped the thick root like plant away. She trotted backwards barely keeping ahead of the tendrils curling towards her. She dropped the vine on the ground and watched at them struck out at the torn plant. She saw that nothing happened and the cloud resumed its mountainous charge towards her. 'Well at least it isn't caustic.' she thought to herself.

She looked forward to see another dead end with yet another archway fast approaching. She then understood that the cloud was meant to push her into leaping recklessly through the next tunnel. She didn't want to cross the bridge just yet so she put on a burst of speed and quickly made it to the end. She turned back to see that she had gained some time on the mass of green, but not much.

‘Think Ginny, Think!’ she told herself furiously. ‘Ok, it’s meant to push and prod be into something stupid. It isn’t caustic, so it won’t hurt if it touches my skin. What else would it have to do to make me step through that doorway?’ Her eyes lit up.

“Of course!” she spoke out loud. She took a risk and cast a simple bubblehead charm on herself. She clenched her body and closed her eyes as the surging mass of green crashed into her. It was so thick and heavy that it pushed her a couple of steps back as it enveloped her body. She didn’t feel any pain and peeked opened her eyes. All she saw was dark green, swirling madly. She groped around a bit and felt the walls on either side of her. She had come to the dangerous conclusion that the mist would befuddle or disorient its victim into acting rashly. All substances that did such and were not a direct spell had to be inhaled and not absorbed through the skin. By simply not breathing it in, it was rendered harmless to her.

She lit her wand with a lumos spell and tried to peer through the cloud. In the newly acquired light she could see the outline of the archway and took a step over towards it. She carefully ran her wand along the edges and the ground casting all four detection charms she had learned in the past month. Oddly she saw that there was no spells at all on the worn old stones. She frowned and puzzled it over a bit. She decided to test it a bit and stooped down to pick on a good sized rock she saw on the path. Biting her lip, she tossed it through the portal and flinched at the sound. When it landed she heard several snaps and a large amount of rustling.

“That...sounded like jaws.” She muttered. Because of the annoyance around her she couldn’t see what had attacked the stone, but in whatever contest and whatever world, jaws that attacked and snapped rocks apart were generally not good for people either. First she had to get rid on the thing around her. Taking another gamble she trotted out from its reach and pointed her wand once she was a couple of yards away. It hesitated a moment and then started towards her again.

“Incendio!” she shouted. A small ball of orange flame erupted from her wand and hit the cloud. Apparently it was flammable like she

thought and the entire area in front of her erupted in bright flames. She cried out and stumbled away as the heat almost blistered her skin. Thankfully the charm she applied before entering the maze saved her from the burns. After a couple of seconds the fire died down and she saw that the way was clear. She licked her lips and moved once more to the archway. Now that the cloud was gone she could see a seething mass of thick foliage and spotted pink petals. She decided to pick up another rock, and with a casual toss, it sailed through to hit the opposite wall. She took a hasty step back as the flowers and vines suddenly opened and a snapping maw, that seemed nothing but teeth, snatch the stone and with a grinding crunch the rock was eaten.

She knew many carnivorous plants from herbology, but this was something else. The size of the mouth and its strength could take her arm off in a second. Well there was one sure way to get rid of leaves. She shook her hand vigorously, to get rid of a sudden tingling sensation. Raising her wand she twirled it in a circle and stabbed forward.

“Incendio Maximus!” A globe of fire shot from the top and detonated against the man-eating plant. She covered her face with her arm as bits and pieces of petals and roots flew past her. A high pitched whine almost split her ear-drums. It sounded almost like a cat in pain. She plugged her ears and grimaced at the sound continued for a moment. Finally it died down and she removed her fingers.

“Lumos.” she cast softly. The tip of her wand illuminated the sudden darkness left in the aftermath of her magical fire. Ahead of her almost all of the lethal plant was gone except for a few thin, struggling tendrils. “Obviously, they haven’t done any gardening at the Burrow.” she smirked, thinking that the Aurors made that a little too easy. In her over-confidence she walked through to continue her journey and came within an inch of death. She felt a wind brush her face and a loud snap caused her to jump back with a frightened scream. She raised her wand higher and snarled. As far as she could see, down the next path was more of the deadly plant. It churned, seeking its food. The walls and ground were thick with the stuff.

She felt a warm trickle down her cheek and reached up to brush it away. Bringing her fingers into her wand light she saw that it was blood. The jaw had scratched her when it made the attempt on her life. With a slow growl she dispelled her light and raised her wand high.

“Scratch me will you?” she snarled. With a savage jerk she brought her arm down and pointed towards the ground. “Exoriosis Infamma Eluvi!” She put all of her concentration into the powerful spell and gripped her wand tightly to control the kickback. Fire erupted from her wand in a gushing torrent of heat. It pooled and splattered against the ground like a thick liquid. More and more it came forth. A surging flood of fire. She started to walk forward as the spell urged the magical fires thicker and higher. As she moved so did the wall of orange heat. It would take awhile and leave her exhausted, but she wasn’t going to be stopped by some pansies with an attitude.

It took her a good ten minutes to burn through the plants. She finally canceled the spell and took an exhausted look behind her. A haze of smoke and cinders ran a hundred yards back. She stuffed her wand into her sleeve and wiped at her face. She was pouring sweat both from the heat of the spell, and the difficulty in maintaining it for so long. It was an extremely complicated and difficult spell that required her to maintain concentration of the flood of fire. If she had deviated even slightly the fire might have consumed her as well. She sagged against the wall and slide down to rest. With trembling hands she pulled out her magical canteen and took a long swallow of the chilled water. She took one more gulp and gasped at the refreshing taste. She wiped her mouth and tucked the canteen away again and leaned her head back. She hoped she wasn’t the only one delayed so much.

Slowly she gathered her strength and stood back up. She redid her pony-tail and stumbled forward a bit to see what her next problem was. She surveyed the scene and could do nothing but sigh. It wasn’t a path way, but a large circular expanse of sand. It looked empty, but she knew better than to think it was. She bit her lip as she peered at the ground of white grain. Flickering her wand again, she sent a stunner at the center of the room and watched as it punctured the center, absorbed by the soft sand, and waited. Soon enough



'something' moved. She couldn't see what it was, but a long thick bulge churned underneath.

"Oh dear Merlin, what is that?" she whispered as a fin of black scales moved sinuously towards where her stunner hit. Slowly it sank back down and the bulge disappeared. The creature delving deeper. With frustration she stomped her foot. "What next?" she screamed at nothing in particular. She sat back down with a plump and blew a stray bang from her eyes. She rested her chin in her hand and stared hard at the sand, pondering a way past the obstacle.

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Hermione was gripping Ron's arm rather tightly as she watched her childhood friend make his way through the Maze. She didn't know what to think or to say. Harry, after seven long years, had shown up and was none other than Mr. Dudders, the owner of Perfect Protections.

"Mione, love. You're about to take off my arm." Ron whispered next to her. She blushed and loosened her grip slightly.

"Where do you think he's been all this time Ron?" she asked her red-haired husband. "And why now to come back? Why not years ago?" her voice trembled slightly with uncertainty and hurt. Ron pried her hand off his arm and slipped it around her shoulders; pulling her into a comforting embrace.

"I don't know." he told her with a soft sigh. "He said he would explain everything tonight at the Burrow though. I guess we'll have to wait until then. Bloody hell he's gotten powerful though. Look at how he is mowing through the Maze!"

Ron was spot on with that account. Almost all of the Monitors were following Harry's progress and it was astounding. He was already almost to the Blood Tree and he had already collected two golden

wands. Nothing seemed to stop or slow him down. He blasted away a group of shadow gnomes, conjured a mirror to reflect the eye sight of the gorgon, and used some sort of wall walking charm on his feet to get around some sort of rotating bush that had thorns as thick and long as a mans thumb. He kept moving at a slow steady trot. He was casting all sorts of spells that Hermione had never heard of, or if she had they were supposedly only available to the Unspeakables. Strong wasn't the word for it. He reminded her a bit of a young Dumbledore with his remarkable wand work.

The Weasley family was torn between watching Harry and paying attention to the single small magical monitor that was showing Ginny's progress, which right now was stalled. She was stuck at a sand pit and was casting a variety of spells at it to try and get around. Hermione felt a sense of pride when she watched Ginny use the flame flood spell to get through the Nicodamien Razor Plants. The other contestants were ahead of her in progress and she was the only one who had yet to get a golden wand. Hermione guessed that the first one for her would be in that sand pit, but Ginny seemed to be trying to get around sand worm rather than confronting it and taking the wand.

The family gasped as the huge thing struck out front the sand and struck against a hastily erected shield. They saw Ginny get bowled back into the charred pathway that she was standing in. Molly gave a soft cry of despair as she watched her baby girl almost get eaten.

"I knew she wasn't ready for this thing Arthur, I just knew it! Our baby is going to die!" she cried out to the patron of the pure blood family. Arthur shook his head and tried to calm down his distraught wife.

"She will be fine Molly. Look how far she's gotten already. She'll figure a way to get the wands, just watch. We raised a powerful witch Molly. Give her your support...she needs it." The mass of brothers all gathered around their mother and comforted her while silently sending their strength to their little sister in the maze.

"Harry's at the tree!" Hermione pointed out to all of them. Everyone turned thinking that the Maze was about to be over just forty minutes since the start. Indeed they saw Harry walk into the vast area that

housed the towering Blood Tree. To their surprise however he ignored it besides severing a couple of vines that reached down to grab them. Instead he stopped and had his wand point him in another direction. Then he resumed his fast steady trot and went back into the labyrinth.

“Why is he going back in?” Ron asked above the confused murmuring of the crowd. “He was almost done!” He looked around to see that the rest of them were just as confused at he was. It even took Hermione a second to figure it out.

“Ron! He’s heading in Ginny’s direction. Remember what he said about going in? He wasn’t going in until the necklace he made for Ginny was taken away. He’s going to protect her!”

“Oh how romantic!” Molly, Hermione and Angelina said at the same time. Their eyes brimming with unshed tears. As one the six pairs of eyes turned towards their male counterparts and glared, as if they wanted the three men to rush into the maze just for them as well. Arthur cringed and looked away, George stared back in confusion, playing the idiot, and Ron just scoffed and folded his arms. Hermione decided to spare a glance over to Eric and found a very unsettling sight. Eric was gone. He was no longer watching the Maze and had left.

“Oh no! This is going to be so bad for Ginny.” she said softly. Ron looked at her askance.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Eric isn’t happy that Harry is back. Don’t you see Ron? He might not make up with her. Harry leaving broke Ginny’s heart. Now his coming back may very well break it again!” She bit her lip trying to get her thick husband to understand. Ron ran a hand through his hair and gave a great heaving sigh of frustration.

“If Ginny’s heart gets broken by not being with Eric then she is still better off. The farther away from that man she is the better.” The whole family heard that and gasped. Molly took a few steps down the stands to Ron’s level and placed her hands on her hips and glared.

“Ronald Weasley! How dare you say such a thing! Eric is wonderful for Ginny. You should be happy that she found someone after all these years.”

“Look everyone. I don’t want Ginny’s heart broken, but before I got canned there were rumors about the man. He was dealing with some rather dodgy characters and smuggling in banned goods. It might just be an innocent way to make a profit, but I don’t like Ginny being around him. He’s too controlling for her.”

“Oh Ron, not that again.” Hermione said in frustration. “Ginny’s a grown woman. She can manage her men just fine.”

“I hate to break up the little tiff about our baby sister,” George interrupted them. “But it looks like she has gotten some help with the sand worm.”

Everyone looked at the display and grinned. The sand pit had four paths running towards it, and in a path to the right of Ginny another contestant, a sandy haired thin man, was shouting across towards her. The two of them, together, might be able to take out the sand worm. The only problem Hermione wondered about was the golden wand. The man might betray Ginny and take the wand for himself. Nervously, Hermione twisted her robes in a knot as her eyes flickered back and forth between Harry Potter, and Ginevra Weasley.

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Ginny was forced to admit that she was stumped. She had exhausted almost her spells trying to find a way past whatever was lurking under the sand. She tried transmuting the sand into rock, but it turned right back into sand. She tried heating the sand into glass, but it just broke apart. She tried conjuring a bridge to cross, but the creature just rose up from the ground and snapped it in two. She even tried a sticking charm to walk along the walls, but that almost cost her a leg.

The creature was ugly, that was for sure. It has rough red and black scales that thousands of jagged little barbs along them. It didn't have a mouth so much as a circular cavern, filled with row after row of needle like teeth and a tongue that looked like it could flay the skin off an ox with one swipe. It was like some giant worm from a nightmare. They never spoke about it in CoMC in Hogwarts that was for sure.

So here she was, stuck sitting at the edge of the pit lazily casting a spell now and then, trying for some kind of result. Every now and then she would throw a blasting charm towards the center to get the thing to rise up. When it did, she would take a pot shot at it with curse or two. The times she did it, the spells just shattered against its scales with no effect. The creature acted like it didn't feel it at all. She tried to back track to find another way around it, but found out that the passage way behind her had closed off and she was stuck. She said a few choice words about the officials when she found herself blocked off by a stone wall with a glowing rune in the center.

"Oi! Girl!" Her head snapped up at being addressed and looked around till she spotted a thin, sandy haired man, standing in the pathway to the right of her. He was calling across the sand pit and gesturing towards her with his wand.

"What's up with this thing?" he called out and pointed towards the sand pit.

"It's sand! What does it look like?" She snapped, not in the mood to be civil to the competition. The man scowled in return and folded his arms across his chest.

"Obviously," he replied sarcastically, "But what's the trick? You wouldn't be standing there glaring at it if you could walk across it." She thought it over a bit. It couldn't hurt to have some help in this. She wasn't getting anywhere by herself.

"Something's waiting under there. Don't step on the sand unless you're willing to lose a leg or two." she growled out to him, her frustration laced in her words. She saw the man study the pit for a moment and then wave his wand from the ground up. She watched

as the sand heaved and a mound rise up in the center. Suddenly, the creature erupted from the grainy surface, and launched itself at the wizard. The man jumped backwards as the thing slammed into the narrow wall where he had been standing. She felt the ground shudder at the impact and she quickly stood up. As the thing sulked away back into hiding the sandy haired wizard tentatively crept back to the edge and curse at the thing.

"It's a bloody sand worm!" he shook his head and looked rather disgruntled. In her mind just knowing what the thing was gave her hope for how to get past it.

"Any idea how to get past it?"

"Get past it? We have to defeat it to get the wand!"

She blinked at the mention of the wand and groaned. She forgot all about the wands. She still wasn't sure she wanted to win. She was seriously debating just waiting at the Blood Tree for Harry to show up. Then she would transmute him into a cow and take his wands from him.

"How the hell are we supposed to beat it? The thing didn't even feel a blasting curse against its head?" she yelled across the way.

"Cutting charms. Get in deep and let it bleed to death."

"Oh." she replied, her mouth left in a small 'o'. "Didn't think of that."

"Really? I never would've guessed." She pursed her lips at the snide remark, but ignored the retort that hovered on her lips.

"Well then get ready. I'll lure it up and you can take a shot at it." she told the man. He nodded and readied it wand. She pointed hers at a spot somewhere between the middle of the pitch and him, to give him the best possible chance with his spell.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Another voice called out. She snapped her head to the left to see yet another contestant. He was

leaning against the wall with his arms folded. Watching the two of them with an amused smirk of his face.

“And why not Templeton?” The sandy haired man snapped, obviously not liking the newest addition to the problem.

“Because it would take about two days for the worm to bleed to death no matter how many times you cut into it, Kneveson.” Ginny didn’t like that at all. If they couldn’t bleed it to death, then what other choice was there?

“Bless you.” Ginny said. The man barked a laugh.

“No. That’s his name,” he pointed towards the sandy haired wizard to her right, “Kneveson.”

“Oh. Sorry.” she told Kneveson who was looking at her with a scowl.

“It’s a perfectly normal name!” he said indignantly. She just nodded, not trusting her mouth to speak for fear she would laugh and insult her help. The man seemed to sense her thoughts and scowled even more.

“So if we can’t blast it apart and we can’t cut it apart, how do we kill it?” she asked, pulling their thoughts back to the problem at hand. Templeton looked across the way towards Kneveson and something seemed to pass between the two of them. Templeton turned towards her and a sinister look took over his sharp, angular face.

“Feed it.” He said with a rather nasty grin on his face. Ginny frowned and looked between him and Kneveson. ‘Feed it?’ she thought. ‘With what?’ Realization dawned on her suddenly as she saw the malicious looks both men were directing towards her. She saw both men raise their wands and she had a second before she saw twin spells of deep blue sizzling towards her.

“Caeles Contego” She cried out in desperation, branding her wand in a circular pattern in front of her. A parabolic spell shield of solid white barely formed in front of her. The powerful shield spell thankfully stopped the spells, but shattered from the duel force of the impacts.

She sent a hasty stunner towards Templeton and duck back behind the wall just in time to avoid a bone shattering curse from Kneveson. She cried out as a piece of rock broke away from the wall and sliced across her cheek. She ducked back out front the wall and sent a powerful blasting curse towards Templeton again. She saw it strike the wall he was standing beside and hurl him away. She had to duck back again as a stunner from the left almost caught her in the head.

She was scared. Very scared. Competing was one thing, but these men were purposely planning on killing her. Worse, feeding her to the sand worm. She couldn't help but shudder at the thought. She hadn't felt this way for seven years. Ever since Belatrix had a Killing Curse pass within an inch from her head back during the battle of Hogwarts.

"Come on out Ginny! Make it easy on yourself. Don't fight it." Her eyes grew wide. How did these men know her name? She guessed they could have known it from her Quidditch team, but the way they said her name sounded like they knew her personally. She suddenly realized that these men didn't want to kill her to get past the worm and claim the wand, but wanted to kill her for entirely different reason. Why she couldn't even begin to fathom. She was just a Quidditch player. She didn't have any enemies that she knew of. She had to think this through in order to survive.

The men wouldn't dare use the Unforgivables in the Maze. It was too closely monitored by everyone and they would be arrested immediately. She wasn't sure about their plan to kill her though. While undoubtedly they would be questioned and apprehended, they could always say that they were trying to just knock her out of the competition and something went wrong. It was the danger of the Maze and they might get away with it. She had to get out of the maze. She didn't care about winning anymore, or even getting revenge on Harry. She just wanted to survive. She raised her wand to send red sparks into the air when suddenly she was yanked off her feet and her wand went clattering away across the uneven rocks. She slammed into the ground and felt the breath knocked out of her. Her vision swam for a moment and she looked down towards her foot in panic. She saw a thick tendril of sand wrapped around her ankle. She flipped onto her stomach and tried to scramble for her wand, but



the sand yanked her away and pulled her back around the corner, into the open.

She heard a vicious bark of a laugh and looked over to see that Templeton had recovered from her blasting curse and had his wand raised, animating the sand to attack her.

“No!” She screamed out hysterically. Tears flung from her face and she shook her head in denial. “Please don’t!” she cried out, begging them to spare her. The two men just laughed at her please and continued to drag her into the sand pit. She desperately flung out her hand and tried to use accidental magic to summon her wand, but to no avail. She felt the rough sand of the pit scratch against her skin as she finally entered the domain of the creature. She was sobbing now, clawing at the ground as a nail broke and a line of blood, where her finger dragged, marked her perilous path. She kicked out; trying to break free of the sand, but the spell was too strong to escape from. She felt the sand heave and looked over her shoulder to see the massive sand worm rear up from its home and tower over her.

Her body froze and she could do nothing but stare at the revolting thing. Its mouth open and its gleaming teeth dripping in anticipation of its meal. Her.

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“OH MY GOD!” Molly Weasley was screaming. “SOMEONE DO SOMETHING!” The red haired mother screamed out as she saw the two men send curses towards her daughter. The family watched at the third man showed up at the scene and some conversation passed between Ginny and the other two men. Suddenly the crowd saw the two men sent two oddly blue curses towards the young red haired woman. Everyone let out a sigh of relief as Ginny spelled up a shield in front of her and ducked back behind a rock.

“Ron?” Hermione asked her husband fearfully. “What’s happening? Why are they attacking Ginny?” she looked over to see that Ron had an angry hateful snarl on his face.

“They’re trying to knock her out of the competition! Those bloody bastards!” he spat out the answer. Hermione clutched at his arm in worry.

“They won’t hurt her will they?” she couldn’t help but ask. Ron just shook his head.

“I don’t know. A lot of rules are called off for this thing. But I don’t think they would dare. The Aurors would lock them up in a heart beat.” He assured his wife. Hermione gave a small nod, but still worried, none the less.

“That’s my sister!” George shouted out and pumped a fist in the air as they watched Ginny send one of them sprawling with a well placed Confringo. The crowd cheered since Ginny had their favor as seeing a woman double teamed by two wizards. Duels had broken out all over the Maze, but this was the first time someone had been double teamed, let alone a witch. Molly had Arthurs arm in a painful grip, but he hardly noticed as he eyes were glued to the monitor in front of him.

Most of the crowd roared its defiance and the entire Weasley family tensed as they saw the dark haired man animate some sand and use it to ensnare Ginny. They watched as it sent her sprawling then start to slowly drag her towards the sand.

“Arthur! Their pulling her towards that Beast!” Hermione gasped and tugged at Ron’s arm.

“Ron!” Hermione cried out. “Do something!”

“I can’t!” He looked panicked. He turned towards her, his eyes wide with fear for his baby sister. “No one, but the Aurors can apperated into the maze without a key.” He whispered. His feelings ushered out with every final breath.

“GINNY!” Molly screamed as they watched the sand worm rise up like a tower from the white depths. Ginny, helpless beneath it. Staring up in horror.

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Ginny looked up in horror. The sand worm swayed sinuously in the air like a dark serpent. Feasting with its eyes before the fatal strike. She seemed to break free of her stupor and struggled to get away. Sheer terror lending her super human strength. He freed her hand and a leg, only to have them once more snagged by the animated sand. She broke free once more only to, once more, have her arm grasped by the spell. She could hear the two men almost doubled over in laughter.

“You look like quite the treat Weasley! Maybe it will choke on you!” Kneveson cackled out. Time seemed to slow as the giant thing reared back. She could almost count the grains of sand falling from its hide. She could count the tips of the hundreds of tiny razorish teeth waiting to dip into her flesh. Her heart stopped as it began its descent. She couldn’t summon a breath as it doze on her. Its shadow falling over her like a curtain of doom.

‘I’m so sorry mum.’ she thought and closed her eyes, not wanting to see her death coming towards her.

“Corpus Eviseri!” Ginny snapped her eyes open as the sand worm let loose a bellowing screech. Coils of blood red spell fire wrapped around the beast’s snake like body. The spun faster and faster, bits of scales were shaved off as the rings bit deeper and deeper. The thing thrashed back and forth, roaring in fury and pain. With a rushing sound and a sickening crunch the spell tore through the worm, rending it apart in a storm of blood and gore.

“What?!” Templeton cried out. Ginny blinked and looked across the pit, her eyes squinting through the thick red smear of blood that

covered her. Once again her breath stopped as she beheld the angelic site. The dazzling maroon robes; the broad shoulders; the soft planes of his face, and the unruly dark hair.

Harry Potter's robes billowed and flickered around him in a surge of wild magic. The two wizards looked at him with narrowed, but uncertain eyes. Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, met their eyes with orbs of blazing emerald green. His teeth were clenched hard, and spittle flicked at the corners of his mouth as he took deep furious breaths.

The words that he spoke were soft, yet full of promise. Full of retribution and pain to come as they drifted through the damp red haze of the eviscerated remains of the sand worm. "That...was a...mistake."

He raised his wand.

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Spell Clarifications -

Exoriosis Infamia Eluvi - roughly translated - Come Forth Fire and Flood

Caeles Contego - Heavenly Shield

Corpus Eviseri - Corpus (from latin meaning 'body' - Eviseri (from root word 'eviscerate' meaning: 'to rend apart to cut into pieces, to dice, to tear apart in a vicious manner.

## Chapter 8

### In the Mouth of Madness

"That...was...a mistake." She heard him say. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. He looked so powerful and full of vengeance. In her dazed, fear distraught mind, she could only begin to ask what he was doing there. Still, she couldn't move or look anywhere else, but at his turbulent form, with his wand held high.

"This isn't school time, Potter. Here, you can get hurt." Templeton said. Kneveson remained silent, his wand at the ready, looking between his friend and Potter. Ginny finally got control over her body and stopped shaking while the three paired off. Slowly she began to inch backward when she realized the animated sand spell was dispelled. If she could only reach her wand.

Templeton flicked his gaze quickly towards Ginny. "Kneveson, see to the girl. I'll take care of Potter." he said lightly. The sandy haired man nodded and turned towards her. Another bone shattering curse hurtled towards her only to be intercepted by one of Harry's spells in a bright cascade of magic.

"Your fight is with me," Harry said. "You leave Ginny out of this."

"Fine then, Potter," Templeton said with a snarl. "You want us, you got us. Stupefy!" A jet of red shot towards Harry, but with a twist of his thick robes he stepped to the side and flicked his wand towards Kneveson; who was just beginning to cast a spell. The man had to leap out of the way to avoid a blasting curse and landed on the soft sand with a grunt. Harry then threw up a shield to deflect another stunner sent towards him. He knelt quickly and dragged his wand along the sand. Suddenly a thick patch of the white grain rose up under the dark haired Templeton and flung him off his feet. Ginny had to smirk as she saw him thrown against the wall.

By this time Kneveson had regained his feet and jabbed his wand forward. "Accipios Acerbi!" A ball of black shot towards Harry. A shimmering dome of purple rose around the green eyes wizards, but to no avail. Harry was suddenly covered in a globe of darkness,

blackier than the darkest night. Kneveson threw curse after curse into the darkness. A bone shattering curse, a stunner, a sleeping curse, and a good sized fireball, for good measure. Ginny gasped as she watched. Her heart beating painfully in her chest. She finally willed her body to move and scrambled out of the pit, into the maze where she had dropped her wand. It was dark, but the pale light from the sand let her see the wooden length on the ground. She grabbed it up and returned to the fight to see Kneveson, and now Templeton, throwing spell after spell into the darkness that surrounded Harry. She took careful aim at Kneveson, deciding he was the easier one to hit.

“Totalum Sopor.” She said softly. A twisting coil of green wound around her wand and shot forward hitting the man in the head. Kneveson swayed for a bit and then collapsed in a deep untroubled sleep. The spell mimicked the ‘Draught of Living Death’; a potion that renders one into a deep coma. Templeton looked her way in anger and slashed his wand through the air. An arc of purple fire flashed out and sizzled through the air.

“Protego!” She said and held her wand out. The fire smashed into the shield and her legs buckled under her from the force. ‘Merlin the man is strong!’ she thought. She sent another stunner towards the dark haired attacker, but he calmly deflected it away. She had to roll away from another curse he sent towards her, and it struck the ground where she had knelt just a moment before. She rose up and tried to deflect the disarming charm that followed her, but she failed and her wand went sailing through the air. She stood panting and defenseless before Templeton as he strode towards her, his wand at the ready.

“You’re a troublesome little tart, aren’t you? I was told you would be annoying. I must admit, that was a rather nice curse you hit that fool with,” he gestured towards the comatose Kneveson, “But you should have gotten me, when you had the chance. It’s time to die Miss. Weasley.”

“Why are you doing this? It’s just a stupid competition!” The man laughed at her.

"You think this is about the maze? Oh no. This is for something else entirely. You've seen too much Ginny. I've been ordered to remove you from the equation. I'm fortunate that I was able to nab Potter as well. I will be handsomely paid."

"Exigo Atra!" a familiar voice called out. The two of them looked towards the globe that had held Harry. It twisted and undulated, fading and tearing apart till the blackness was fully dispelled. Harry stood utterly unharmed under his purple shield dome. The sand around him glassy and cracked from the onslaught of spells hurled at him.

"Impossible!" Templeton cried. "No one could have survived that!" Harry smirked and gave a rueful shrug.

"People always say things like that to me. I've been a contradiction since I was one year old. I'd have hoped that by now, I'd stop having to hear that." Harry dusted off his robes as if he had done nothing more than step out of a floo. Ginny was floored and just stared at him flabbergasted. Harry was definitely much more proficient at magic than she had seen him last. It was like a youthful, cocky, version of Dumbledore.

Templeton moved quickly and grabbed Ginny by her hair and dragged her in front of him. She cried out in pain from his strong grip and tried to struggle free. His wand pressed up against her chin and he paused at the threat.

"Drop your wand Potter, or else the pretty tart here will lose her pretty little face." Harry stared at the man and flicked his eyes towards her.

"It'll be alright Ginny. Don't worry." He told her, but didn't drop his wand. Templeton laughed in a nervous high strung manner that set her teeth on edge and delivered a chill down her spine.

"Don't make promises you can't keep. I said drop your wand."

"No. You drop yours. The second you hurt her, I will kill you. Don't think I can't get away with it either. This whole fight is probably being

monitored as we speak. Everyone will see what you do and what I do. I'm gold right now. The Ministry wouldn't dare touch me."

The dark haired wizard that held Ginny licked his lips nervously and looked around for some way to escape. Ginny felt him shift to get a better grip on his wand and she took her chance. Her skills from years of Quidditch came to her and her hand lashed out and snatched the wand from his hand. She sent an elbow behind her into his stomach and dove away from his doubled over form. Harry didn't hesitate to take advantage.

"Atrox Sominus!" he incanted and waved his wand back and forth. An almost transparent spell of the palest blue shot from the wand tip and struck the man. Templeton fell to his knees and was silent for a moment. Then he stared in horror at some unseen thing in front of him. With a cry of utter terror he covered his eyes and curled into a ball.

"No! Please no!" he yelled and thrashed on the ground. Harry walked over and cast a silencing spell on the man. Ginny couldn't take her eyes off the, obviously, terrified man that, moments before, had tried to kill her. Whatever the curse was that Harry had hit him with, it wasn't very pleasant. 'Harry!' The thought brought her back to reality and she turned her head to see him standing next to her, gazing at her with concern.

"Are you alright Gin?" he asked softly, his eyes boring into hers. She twisted her various limbs and only felt some slight bruising in places and a possible swollen ankle.

"Yes..." she replied softly and lowered her gaze. He had come for her. Yet again he had arrived like the proverbial white knight and saved her life. It was becoming a rather disgusting habit.

"Thank...That's good." He said in a nervous voice and glanced over to the prone form of Kneveson. "Nice work with that one," he said. Trying to sound cheerful.

"You came back." Ginny said, cutting straight to the point. She saw him hesitate before giving a small nod.



"It was time."

"It was time year's ago." her voice took on a slight edge. Harry shuffled from foot to foot and ran a hand through that troublesome mop of his.

"I wanted to, but things happened. I had some obligations to take care of." Ginny sneered in disgust.

"Yes well, we wouldn't want you to disappoint anyone would we? Oh wait! Didn't you have obligations here too? You know I think you did. I can't remember to well. It's been SEVEN YEARS!" She screamed in his face. Harry blanched and took a hasty step back from her anger.

"Ginny. I'll explain everything tonight at the Burrow, but right now we have to move, I doubt those were the only men around here and we need to get to safety." He really wasn't ready to go into an hour's long discussion in the Maze of all places. Ginny took a few breaths and pushed her anger down. She redid her pony-tail that had come undone in the fighting and went over to pick up her wand.

"Yuck!" she exclaimed as she pulled it from a puddle of brownish sludge that could only have been the worm's blood. She walked over and wiped it off on Harry's pristine and expensive robes.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "You didn't-" He cut himself off at the look Ginny sent his way and prudently shut up. "Okay, we should get out of here. Let's send up some sparks and have the Aurors get us out of here. We can meet up with your family and head to the Burrow. Ok?" Ginny gave a serene smile and nodded. He looked at her askance for a moment. The Ginny he remembered never agreed to anything so easily.

"Ummm, right. Okay, let's do this." he raised his wand into the air.

"Oh Harry?" he paused and looked at her to see a rather evil smile on her face and her wand aimed at his chest. He gulped.

“Oh shit.” was all he could mutter before an off white light struck him. His world distorted and spun rapidly for a moment and found himself slightly closer to the ground and much, much heavier. ‘What the?’ he thought and tried to look at Ginny.

“MOOOOOOO!” He exclaimed and felt a sudden onset of panic. ‘No! She wouldn’t have!’

“Hope you enjoy being a cow Harry.” Ginny said sweetly at the large bovine in front of her. “Don’t worry. I’ll send Ron along later to milk you properly, keep those utters fresh! Ta-ta!” She exclaimed. She was about to move on, till she saw two golden wands on the ground by the now, ‘mooing’ Harry. “Oh! You shouldn’t have Harry! How sweet of you.” she picked them up and tucked them into her belt. “Later!” she gave a lazy wave and disappeared back into the maze, going the direction that he had come from.

‘Red heads’ he muttered wryly. It came out as another moo.

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Hermione and Molly were beside themselves and clutched at each other eagerly as they watched the fight break out between the two wizards, and Harry, and Ginny. It was a vicious and short battle, but everyone breathed a sigh of relief when it was done.

“Oh thank Merlin he got there in time.” Molly cried, dabbing at a glimmering eye. “I-I thought I had lost my little girl.”

“It’s alright now Molly.” Arthur said as he put an arm around his wife’s shoulder. “We can’t dwell on ‘might have been’s’. Only on what is.” he often had rather wise advice at times Hermione thought.

“Ron?” she asked, and her husband looked back at her from the stand below. “Those men? Will they be arrested?”

“Can’t say ‘Mione. It depends on if they were purposely trying to kill her or not. It looks like they were, but if they come up with a good excuse, they might get off.”

“But Ron! You can’t really think that they weren’t going to let that thing eat her do you?”

“Hermione! I know! That’s my little sister down there and I want to see them in Azkaban as much as anyone. But you know the law from your time in the Ministry. There are hundreds of loop holes that people can slip through.”

“Can’t you-?”

“No, I can’t. I’m not an Auror anymore. In fact all contacts and friends have bailed on me and are distancing themselves as much as possible. We just have to hope that her status and the attack is enough to put them away.”

Hermione sighed sadly and stepped down next to him. She dipped and burrowed herself under his arm and held his waist.

“I wish Wizarding law was as fair and equitable as muggle law. It seems like more good people get put away over bad.” she whispered to him.

“I know love. It’s one of the things that’s been changing lately. Give it some time. If we can get goblins into Gringotts, then we can get muggle laws into the Ministry.” Hermione laughed and concentrated on the Monitor watching Harry and Ginny talk.

“I’m so happy he’s back, but so mad at him Ron. It’s been so long. I think when we see him tonight I’m going to hug him, kiss him, and then hex him.” she stated firmly.

“Ha! I think your going to have to wait on that Love.” Hermione and the Weasley family laughed as they saw Ginny transfigure Harry into a cow and take his wands from him.

“Well, at least she got some wands out of the deal.” George said with a certain satisfaction next to them.

“George!” Angelina scolded him and slapped him upside the head. “She stole those from him!”

“Hey!” he defended himself. “That’s the maze! Why fight monsters when you can turn someone into a cow who already has?”

Everyone including Molly gave a nice hearty laugh. George could always find a way to lighten the mood. Probably the most valuable son of the family. Ron leaned over and whispered into Hermione’s ear. “I have to go see about something. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“But what about the Maze?” she asked quizzically.

“I won’t be long. George is recording it all, so I can catch up on what I miss later.”

“Okay, but where are you going?”

“I just have to look into something real quick. Old business I forgot to take care of.” Hermione narrowed her eyes.

“Ron...” she said in warning.

“It’s nothing bad ‘Mione! Just about my hazard pay, from setting the Maze up. The guy has been dodging me for weeks, and I want to catch him, where he can’t evade me.

“Well...Okay, but don’t be long. And get that Money, we need it.” Ron gave her a cheeky grin and disapperated. Hermione stared for a moment thinking something wasn’t right, but the roar of a crowd diverted her attention to another duel that was taking place between two people she didn’t know. She absently noted that they were both pretty good an animating objects.

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Ron arrived in Ginny's flat a second later after leaving the Maze. He hated having to lie to his wife, but some things were necessary in his line of work. He had his wand out immediately on arriving and looked around. The good thing about placing a silencing charm on yourself was that it allowed you to apperate into a room without making a sound. He had placed several wards around Ginny's place a week ago and they went off while Ginny was being attacked. He didn't want to leave while she was in danger, so had to sacrifice the wasted time before coming.

The room was a mess. Several things were overturned and books were scattered all over the place. He gave an indignant frown and scanned the room, dropping the silencing charm around him to listen for any other intruders. The place was silent as a grave. Lightly he took some steps towards her bed room. His toes moving between the disturbed debris, so as not to make a sound. The door to her room was ajar and he quickly peeked in. Finding it empty, he figured that the place was empty and the search was probably conducted by multiple persons rather hastily.

As in the main living area, Ginny's room looked like a tornado had swept through it. Her bed was torn up and over turned, her dresser was pulled apart and her cloths tossed around the room. Some of her books had been ripped apart and holes were punched through the wall. Someone wanted something that Ginny had, and from the looks of the damage they didn't find it. Just to be on the safe side Ron cast a revelashio spell that would let him know if anyone else was in the flat. As he guessed he was all alone. He didn't want Ginny to know someone had broken past her security and tore up her home. With Harry back, all his baby sister needed was this on top of things. He rolled up his sleeves and started to repair and replace her things back in the order they were in before. Hopefully she wouldn't know what happened. After that, he had better get back to the Maze or Hermione and his Mum would have his hide.

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Eric dusted off his robes and wrapped his cloak a little tighter around him. He had made the call for the Council Leader twenty minutes before hand and was waiting for him to arrive. He was standing on a forested bluff that overlooked the English Channel. He watched as the cold waters crashed again and again on the rock outcropping far below. The white spray of the broken waves glittered like diamonds in the crisp, chill air. He was watching them silently when he heard the distinctive crack that signified an apparition. He turned to see the golden robes of his illustrious leader swaying in the cold breeze. As usual The Leader's face was covered by a charm that made it look like a cloth of molten gold. No one knew what the Leader looked like, nor even what his real name was. All they knew was that he had an impressive command of the ancient languages, and an even more impressive command of wealth and political influence.

"You have something to report Eric?" the silken, yet spidery voice whispered. Eric repressed a shudder and gave a reverent nod.

"Yes, High One. Harry Potter has come into the open. He joined in the grand Merlin Maze little more than forty minutes ago." He hoped that he was pleased with the information. Eric was rewarded with a sly chuckle.

"Sooner than expected...no matter, it is better this way. Is the Weasley girl dead?"

"I do not know yet, High One. I left as soon as I had the chance to give you the report."

"You did well. Hopefully our agents have taken her life by now. I will speak to you at the meeting within the week." He made to leave, but Eric stopped him.

"Wait High One. There is more. It seems that Potter owns the company Perfect Protections. The one that has made the Aurors so dangerous to us lately. He has a residence in Hogsmead." Eric could almost see the sinister smile, behind the mask of molten gold, as the Leader's body rose up with an eager bearing.

“Oh this is excellent news Eric! You have done better than anyone could have hoped for. He must have the book hidden in his shop. We will strike before the month is out. You deserve a reward for this. An increase in rank, wealth and more.”

Eric shivered in anticipation. The Leader did not punish or lead through pain and fear. In a council that thrived on money wealth and power, the increase of such things was a boon and the loss...a devastating punishment. No one wanted to fail, or they would quickly lose what set them apart from other wizards. The very idea that he might gain the influence and wealth to stand along side other members, such as Marco and Sebastian, was an aphrodisiac to his ruthless soul.

“Thank you, High One. As you know, it is a great reward you offer me. I have one other question for you, if I may be so bold.” Eric inclined his head respectfully.

“You may ask Eric.”

“The one that we are considering for membership. I think it may be too soon to admit him. I don’t trust him, High One.” That was an understatement, he loathed the man.

“He has a vast amount of wealth, some influence, does well with a wand and is the perfect focal point for our dealings in England. I have looked into his background well before considering him. He was involved with Lord Voldemort and the war that took place here. How he escaped imprisonment I was not able to find out, but most likely he bought his way out. He will be fine. Trust in me Eric. Draco Malfoy will do well in our ranks.”

Eric gave a deeper bow and dropped the matter. “As you say High One, so shall I do.” The Leader touched his shoulder in a farewell, and with a ‘crack’, he disappeared away into the unknown. Eric took one last glance over the bluff, to the waves below, and vanished as well.

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Harry Potter was very angry, and very worried. Ginny was being very stubborn in continuing into the maze on her own. There could be others after her and she had the nerve to transfigure him. If she didn't want to give up on the Maze she could have just said so, rather than resort to this. As such in his emotional turmoil it took awhile before he could call on the inherent magic all Witches and Wizards had and reverse the change to his body. Fifteen minutes after Ginny had took off; he was finally back to his normal self, admittedly, with a hunger for grass.

"Stubborn woman," he muttered as he brushed himself off. "She even took the wands" He understood Ginny's anger at him, but really didn't think the Merlin Maze was the place to take it out on him in. He waved his wand over himself muttering a few powerful shielding charms. The charms could protect him against the strongest spells, but would only last against one shot. It was safety measure against surprise attacks. He then held his wand in his hand and concentrated on the image of Ginny.

"Point me." He said softly. The wand jumped a bit, and then swung in his hand, showing him the way. "Time to go hunting I guess." He took off down the path he went, keeping an eye out for Ginny's footprints, or any tracks she may have left. Still he knew where she was going. The Blood Tree. She had two of the golden wands he had acquired and would be aiming for the silver one at the top of the Tree. He would have to find a new path since the maze changed after each person went through it, but that shouldn't be a problem. The problem was getting to her in time. He didn't come back, just to lose her once again.

"As the muggles say, time to bring out the big guns." he threw on a speed charm that would allow him to run faster than a normal person without tiring. It was a nifty little spell that he rarely had the chance to use. With that spell added and his defenses raised he made his way in deeper. Every now and then he could pick up the faint sound of spell fire, or the roar of some unknown beast in the distance.



Probably a dragon or two. As the minutes ticked by he would occasionally blast away a hungry plant or some such oddity that was around every corner of the place.

He finally broke through the twisting paths of the Maze into an area that had some tumbled and broken ruins. Fallen pillars of grey marble dotted the area with an occasional, empty, vine covered, archway. If this place followed the pattern of the maze then something was hiding here that held a golden wand. He didn't care about the wand, but he couldn't yet pass without dealing with whatever was here.

"Bloody, waste of time." he whispered and took some steps farther into the ruins. Thankfully he didn't have to find the creature. Unfortunately, it found him.

"Well, well, well. Ssssuch a tasssty treat to come into my home." The voice was obviously snake-like, but wasn't speaking in parseltongue. He turned slowly, without threat to behold the Naga. It had a beautiful face and torso with a long sinuous snake like tail for legs. She was wrapped around a pillar, and the grey of her skin made it easy for him to have missed her. Her hair was long and blond; her eyes, silted and green. She had a generous chest covered by a flimsy pale white silk, which left little to the imagination. Harry might have admired her if it wasn't for that tail and the row of wicked looking fangs she was showing him as she smiled.

"I want no trouble fair Lady," he decided to try and talk her out of attacking; "I do not wish to claim anything that is yours. I just wish to move on to other places."

"What, do I care for your wantssss mortal? I was stolen from my cave and bound in this cold damp ruin for weeks. You will pay for the crimes your friends have caused." She slide from the pillar and moved more into the light.

'Oh dear Merlin!' Harry thought as he got a better look at her. She didn't have two arms. She had six. 'A Shiva!' the panicked thought raced through his mind. In his vast travels he had never encountered one of these things, but what he heard he count himself very lucky.

“You’re a Shiva! What madness possessed the Ministry to bring you here?!” he spoke out loud as he took steps away from her.

“You are assute, young wizard. Madnesssss indeed, for I will enjoy your flesh for weeksss to come.” With that she shot forward, a short sword in each of her long arms. He tried to raise his wand, but was too late. With a grunt the swords connected against his side and sent it flying through the air to tumble along the ground. He felt the flickering of his protection charms fail from the attack, but they saved his life. He rolled with the momentum and came up with his wand ready.

“Very Nicccce, little wizard!” The Shiva exclaimed as she rushed at him again. Harry couldn’t afford to waste the time incanting his spells. They would be harder to cast, but he couldn’t spare the split second in time. He flicked his wand and a torn down pillar flew through the air and smashed into her side, pinning her against the ground. She screamed in fury, but Harry was under no illusions that she was hurt or that would hold her for long. He took the moments respite to cast some strong charms on him self; this time warding against physical blows.

He looked up as the massive and heavy piece of marble went sailing away and the Shiva stood up.

“You will pay for that mortal. With every tantalizzzing sssscrape of your ssskin!”

“You talk too much. Let’s get this done with.” he told her. She gave him a feral grin and darted forward. Harry wasted no time or power trying to kill her. With shotgun line ‘booms’ he fired off a trio of some nasty curses. Bolts of red, yellow, and orange, were batted aside by the things weaving swords. Harry cursed and doze to the side as the Shiva got in close and swung her weapons. He felt something strike hard against his leg, but his wards held and he was unharmed.

“Umbris Fununtrum.” He said as he came to his feet, whispering a piece of dark magic that he had learned in Russia. A misty line of black fire over eight feet long dangled like a whip from the tip of his wand. The Shiva moved to strike at him, but he cracked the whip

through the air and score a cauterizing mark on one of her forearms. She hissed in pain and slide back, eyeing the whip warily.

“You are a dangeroussss one, wizard.” she said. Harry ignored the remarks and concentrated on keeping up his stamina and not wasting his breath with talk. He wove the whip back and forth through the air, taunting and daring the powerful monster to strike at him. It went like that for a good minute. She would try to quickly get inside his defenses and he would respond by cracking the black fire whip, injuring her. She had dozens of deep and infected burn marks over her body. One particular shot of his had burned away the silk cloth she used to cover her chest. That was all that she needed. While Harry was momentarily distracted by her freely seen chest, her swords dove in and crossed. Harry recovered and snapped the whip down, but the swords got caught in the ‘v’ of the crossing blades. With a yank, she tore her swords apart and the magic of the whip vanished.

“Oh!” was all Harry could say as a heavy tail caught him across the shoulders to, once again, send him tumbling over the damp grass. The breath was knocked out of him as he slammed against one of the empty archways. He went the wards fail him at the worse possible time. The Shiva was following his closely, with her swords held high for the final strike. Harry desperately flicked his wand again and again, slashing over and over to send every cutting and painful curse he could think of. Blood fountained from her shoulder, fire erupted along her cheek and a hole spiked through an arm. She seemed to ignore them as she brought the swords down.

Harry rolled away and screamed as fiery pain tore along his back. She had got a good slice in as he dodged, and he could make out the sweet laugh of satisfaction she made. If she was smart she would have pressed the attack, but she decided to play with Harry for a bit, thinking he was done for.

“You are no match for me wizard! Acccccept your death, and enter the darknessss!” She slowly started to slither towards him as he crawled away, wincing with every moment along his back.

"I didn't want to kill you," Harry said through clenched teeth, "but you leave me no choice." With a swish he shot a pale white spell at her. She laughed and easily dodged the poorly aimed spell.

"Your aim seems off, is that really the best you can do?" Harry smirked at her.

"What makes you think I was aiming for you?" he grinned. A roar caused her to pause and look over her shoulder. Harry's spell had struck a large bolder behind her. The spell was a powerful one, from the transfiguration school. The bolder was now a large tawny lion.

"Oh, dangerous indeed..." The Shiva whispered as she looked at the lion through narrow eyes. Harry took the moment that she looked away to his advantage.

"Incarcerous!" he shouted out. Thick ropes shot from his wand to coil around the surprised Shiva. The spell landed and pinned her arms just as the lion jumped. With her arms and swords bound she couldn't defend against the nine hundred pound animal as it tackled her. The lion raked its claws, tearing deep gouges in her torso and bit down in her shoulder. The Shiva screamed in agony as her body was ravaged. She however was not to be denied. Shiva's were not one of the most dangerous creatures in existence for anything. Calling on her own magic to lend her strength she broke free of the robes binding her and struck the lion across the side with a heavy punch.

The lion was knocked to the side, but like call cats do, it landed on its feet and growled deep in its throat. The Shiva was panting and swooning from the pain, and loss of blood, as she eyed the stalking lion. Harry took the opportunity to use his wand to locate Ginny. He took another look as the Shiva and lion clashed once again and headed away. He didn't have time to finish her off and honestly wasn't sure he would have been able to. She was tangle with the transmutation for a bit and by then he would be long gone. He was grinning as he heard the struggles and roar as he left the area in search of his lost love.

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“What did I miss?” Ron asked as he arrived back in the stands. Hermione jumped up and immediately assaulted him with her excitement.

“Oh you won’t believe it Ron. Harry fought a SHIVA, to a standstill! It was an amazing battle! I can’t believe you weren’t here to see it!” she frowned at him with disappointment. Ron however was confused and blinked several times.

“What’s a Shiva?” he had to ask. Like always Hermione gave him ‘that look’. The look like he was worthless when it came to magical knowledge. A look that annoyed him to no end.

“A Shiva, Ron, is a magical creature related to the Naga. Or rather the Naga is related to it. It had a human body, but a snake tail for legs that it uses to move. Instead of two arms like a normal Naga it has anywhere from six to twelve, depending on its age. They can live for close to a thousand years and have strong magic powers. They are extremely strong, very fast and have amazing healing abilities. It is not uncommon for a Shiva to throw boulders that weigh up to a ton over fifty feet. What makes them dangerous is that they are also very intelligent. They are as smart, or smarter, than any human, and with their advanced age they often have a great deal of experience over most wizards. There are few magical creatures that can defeat a Shiva. Their known enemies are wild dragons, who favor the caves that they live in, and Chimeras, for the same reasons.”

“Blimey Hermione! Throw a boulder?” she nodded smugly. “And Harry beat one of those things?!”

“No he fought it to a stand still and escaped. It takes more than one wizard to kill a Shiva, Ron. One on one it’s almost impossible for a wizard to kill one. They are too fast and strong.”

“Still...wow. He’s gotten good hasn’t he?”

“Yes Ron, we already had that conversation before. Did you get the money?”

“Huh? Oh! No, I’m sorry; the officials wouldn’t let me in to see him.”

“Then why did it take so long?” she pressed the questions.

“I kept trying to get in,” Ron shrugged. “What’s Ginny up to?” he asked, trying to change the subject. Hermione noticed, but let the matter drop.

“They just now focused a monitor back on her. She is running away from something. They had everything watching Harry’s fight. The crowd was going wild. Twelve others are out of the Maze, and no one has died yet, thankfully. A lot of them, including Ginny and Harry, are close to the Tree now.”

Ron nodded absently and watched his little sister running frantically through the maze. He doubted that she was running that recklessly through the Maze, just to make it to the Blood Tree. Which meant that she was running ‘from’, something. For her to have that look on her face, Ron guessed it wasn’t something very nice.

“It’s almost over ‘Mione. Then we can all go back to the Burrow and find out what the hell is going on.”

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Harry was winded. He had run a great deal the past couple of minutes and had to stop to take a break. He was almost to the Blood Tree where it would all be finished. He would be happy to put it all behind him. He took the moment of rest to attend to his wound on his back. It was shallow, and thankfully didn’t cut into his spine, or he would have died. ‘Just one more bit of luck in a life full of it,’ he thought ruefully. Once he was finished he pulled his robes back on and proceeded with the recklessness that he met life with. It had

always served him well, and figured, why change now? He seemed to have picked up a few stray fairies that were fluttering around him in curiosity. Wherever there were lots of magic, fairies would be there to.

He finally turned a corner to see the awesome expanse in the center of the Maze that held the giant Blood Tree. Up close it was a formidable site. When they planted it, the Ministry had somehow accelerated its growth, and it now towered several hundred feet into the air. Harry eyes it with trepidation. He had faced the things several times to get the wood needed for some of his creations. Each time was a perilous experience and he dreaded facing this one. It was the largest he had ever seen. Most smart wizards would find a young growth and stay far away from the larger ones.

He liked to use the sap as well for potions. To get that he usually had to raze the ground and leaves with powerful incendiary spells and then cover himself with the most powerful wards and protections he knew while he collected the stuff. It was exhausting and a slip usually meant death. Hell, a Blood Tree could take down and kill a fully grown dragon.

“Give me your golden wands and I won’t hurt you.” a voice said from off to the side. Harry glanced over without much concern to see a tall skinny man with spiked and bleached blond hair. He looked, almost, like a smart Malfoy; almost.

“I don’t have any wands, sorry. Someone already took them from me.”

“I don’t believe you. You wouldn’t be here unless you had them.” Harry revised his opinion and decided the man was indeed as dumb as Draco.

“That must mean you have some wands as well. Hand ‘em over please.” The man blinked and looked confused.

“I don’t have any! I’m asking for yours!”

“Well you said no one would be here without some golden wands and as you’re here that must mean you have them as well.”

“What? No I-” Harry took the moment of confusion to stun the silly man.

“Idiots.” he muttered. He took a look around the clearing to see if anyone else was around. Thankfully, it was clear and he could prepare a bit. He stepped up to a fall and cast a chameleon charm on himself so that he blended in. Then, once again, set up some wards around him self to protect against spells and physical attacks. Now it was time to wait. The Time limit was almost up. In thirty minutes the Maze would be called to an end. Soon now the place would be full of People battling each other and the Tree in order to win the Egg. He could just sit here and let them have their fun, till he found Ginny. Then, even if he had to stun her, he would take her and leave the hell hole.

He didn’t have to wait long. Within five minutes six wizards stepped into view. All of them ranged in various appearances, except that they all had the contestant uniform, and all looked a little worse for wear. Scraped, bloody, and battered, they made there way over close to him. His charms were holding and they never noticed him. Harry briefly wondered why they weren’t attack each other, but found out a moment later.

“She should be here soon.” the largest of the group said. “Reports from Neil said he herded her this way with a few spells.”

“I hope so.” a small shady looking man said. “I only entered this blasted thing for the contract money. If this Weasley girl doesn’t show up soon I’m out of here.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was right. There were more men in the Maze after Ginny. Eight accomplished wizards would be tough to handle. Especially having to protect Ginny at the same time. Maybe he could take out a few of them before she arrived to complicate things. Slowly he edged closer, staying against the wall so as not to stand out. He listened to some of their conversation and grew angrier as they described what they might do to Ginny in revenge for putting them through the Maze. Oh yes, he would definitely take out some of them men.



When he was several paces away he raised his wand quickly, which dispelled his chameleon charm. One of the men noticed and looked Harry with surprise.

"Watch out!" he shouted, but was too late.

"Confringo!" Harry cried and with a blossoming spell the men were blasted away and sent head over heels through the air. One of them got too close to the Blood Tree and screamed as a vine shot down and ensnared him. He started to spasm and his face turned a blue-green hue as the poison seeped into his skin. Harry quickly sent a stunner at the small, shady looking, man, dropping the count of enemies to six. By now he had to duck and dodge a plethora of jinxes and curses aimed at him. A few deflections later, and the battle was on in full.

Harry realized right from the start that these men were not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill wizards. They were all good and knew how to use a wand. Harry had underestimated them when all six showed up rather battered and figured they had to team up to get through the Maze in one piece. What he didn't know was that the Maze took numbers into account and made itself more difficult if the contestants somehow banded together to get through. If he had known that, then he wouldn't have started off the fight with a blasting curse, but would have used a spell much more devastating to the group.

He was forced to, once again, call on his most powerful spell shield, and a scintillating dome of transparent purple covered him. He winced as he felt the battering of the spells against his magic, but he needed time to plan some things out and the pervalidus shield was the best spell he had at his disposal. While he was safely behind the dome, he studied the man arrayed against him carefully. He didn't care about the spells hurled at him, what he cared about, was the eyes. Who was the most dangerous? He looked for that, certain look. That cunning, calculating squint that showed a mind racing with ideas.

He found it in a rather nondescript man that was hanging back a bit. He wasn't wasting his power with bone breaking curses, or conjuctivating jinxes. He was testing the shield with an array of

weaker spells that were meant to break through magic, rather than harm a person. All the while, his eyes were shifting towards the different paths, waiting for the target, Ginny, to show up. He was someone that didn't allow himself to get distracted easily, nor panic at problems that may come up. Problems like Harry.

Even though Harry tried his hardest to stay out of trouble and away from dark wizards he soon found out that no matter, how hard he tried, trouble would always find him. He had been in many a duel during his seven year absence, and had learned a thing or two. That was why he knew that the man would be able to block most of the next spell that Harry cast at him. That was why Harry knew that the spell wouldn't obliterate him like normal; just incapacitate the man...for a few months.

"Exitium!" he cried out in a powerful voice. It was Harry's strongest spell, and he held his wand straight and steady. A force of power shot forth. It had no color and could not be seen. The only thing that marked its passage was the powerful ripple in the air, and the ground, that was rent apart in a line towards his foe. The wizard obviously knew what the spell was by the terrified look in his eyes. He quickly conjured a spell dome similar to Harry's but solid in color. It availed him not. When the rippling spell of destruction hit, the dome shattered like glass. While weakened from the obstacle the spell still struck the man in the chest. Like a bullet he was hurled away in the blink of an eye.

The spells stopped battering against his shield and Harry smirked at the men who were glancing at each other, for orders. The largest of the men, who had spoken first, stepped forward.

"Alright, who the bloody hell are you?" he asked. Harry just shrugged as if it was no concern.

"Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you." Several of the men gasped and took a step back. "I think it would be in your best interests to raise your wands and signal to have the Aurors remove you from the competition. As you can see, your out matched." Harry wasn't really sure about that, but it never hurt to unnerve an enemy. He learned

that the hard way during the war. The large man however, was having none of it.

“Bah! It’s five against one. You only got two of us by surprise. We’ve no grudge against you. Go do what you need to with the Tree; we’ll leave you alone, if you leave us alone.” Harry frowned.

“I don’t give one knut about the Tree, or winning the Maze. You’re here to kill a friend of mine, and I can’t let you do that.”

For some reason Harry noticed that, while he was speaking, the faces of the men changed. First it was one of fear. Then they turned into a set of evil smirks, and barely contained laughter. Harry briefly wondered what had changed till he heard the voice behind him.

“I found you little wizzard.” A honey-sweet voice whispered. Harry gulped and slowly turned his head. Yep, there, just outside of his shield, stood the Shiva. The blasted thing had tracked him through the Maze to get its revenge. Harry noted that all of its wounds were healed and she was as healthy as ever, but very...very pissed off.

“Hello again!” Harry laughed nervously as he started into the narrow slits that were the Shiva’s eyes. “I see you’re all healed up! No harm done right! What do you say to us just forgetting all about the little tiff awhile ago eh?” Harry had no illusions about that really happening, but it couldn’t hurt to hope.

“Ssssssss!” The Shiva hissed in anger and raised her tail. Wrapped in its coils was the boulder that Harry had transfigured into a lion. It was a large heavy thing that probably weighed close to a thousand pounds. “Remember this little wizard?” Behind him Harry could hear the five wizard start to chuckle.

“Nope! Can’t say that I do! Looks kind of plain. I can change it into something else if you’d like!” Harry always got a little cheeky at the worst possible times. The Shiva hissed in anger again and reared the stone back to strike it against Harry’s pervalidus shield. Just then a rustle and a flash of red drew everyone’s attention. Ginny had burst through a bush, panting with exertion. She stopped and surveys the odd see in front of her. To her left was Harry with some kind of scary

looking snake woman behind him, who, amazingly enough held a rock the size of a small car over her head. On her right stood a group of five ragged looking contestants. It was an odd scene and everyone was staring at her.

“Don’t mind me!” she said sweetly. “Just on my way to the Tree. I’ll be going now.” One of the men laughed and raised his wand.

“I don’t think we can let you do that Miss. Weasley.” Ginny sighed and glanced behind her for a moment.

“I really don’t think this is the time guys. If you want to take a crack at me, do it on the pitch, but we should probably leave right about now.” She felt the faint tremor under her feet on the approaching monster.

“Ginny!” Harry said. “These guys are here to kill you, like those other two. Get out of here!”

“A friend of yourssss little wizard?” The snake woman behind him cooed. “How delightful. I’ll enjoy sucking on her bones.”

“She’s ours snake bitch!” The large man scolded the Shiva. “Stick to Potter and leave us to our business.”

“I really hate to interrupt your little debate on who gets to kill me, but I’m afraid you’ll have to deal with my friend first.” she threw a thumb over her shoulder. The tremors were much closer. The five men and Harry stared behind her in confusion.

“Gentlemen, Snake-bitch,” Ginny smiled and stepped far to the side. “Meet Glug!”

The foliage, which hid the path, burst open, like an explosion. A roar filled the air as a large creature of hair teeth and claws rushed through. Everyone stopped to look at the site.

The Chimera was as dangerous as a dragon and twice as vicious. This particular mix of animals was more than deadly. Its back was easily six feet high. It had three heads, each of a dangerous animal. In the center a golden man offset the lion’s jaws. To the left was the

head of a dragon, horns and all, and on the right, was a hawk's head. Its feathers and large, sharp beak gleaming and dripping blood. Its body was massive and a dark brown that rippled with powerful muscles. A long scaly tail ended with the head of a large, venomous snake. The fang hissing and dropping its vile concoction. The Chimera let loose a deafening bellow of fury.

Everyone, including the Shiva started to back away.

"Ginny..." Harry spoke first. "What did you do?" Ginny held up an egg.

"Catch!" she threw it at the Shiva with a grin on her face

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A/N -

About the chimera. I know mythology depicts it in a different form, but the real term behind the mythology is that it is simply a monster composed of different parts, so technically it could be made of any type of parts you can think of, that's a Chimera. I really never liked the whole 'goat' thing in the mythology, so I changed it.

Accipios Acerbi - root from latin meaning "receive darkness" / enchants an object to give off a globe of darkness eight feet in diameter

Totalum Sopor - root from latin meaning "Total Sleep" / puts the victim into a deep coma.

Exigo Atra - Root from latin - "To expell the dark." / counter to the Acerbi charm, and other darkness creating spells

Atrox Sominus – The person's worst nightmares manifest and paralyze them with fear

Umbris Fununtrum - roughly translated (Shadow rope) - creates a whip of burning black fire from the wand.

Exitium - from latin root meaning "destruction" - One of the higher tiers of combat spells, discussed later in the story. "its a hightened version of 'reducto' and 'confingo'

Pervalidus Charm - A spell shield that covers the caster in a dome of various hues. One of the strongest shield spells in creation, only the strongest of spells and unforgivables can pass through or break it. The more transparent it is, the better it is cast.

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## Chapter 9

### To The Victor, Goes the Spoils

Seven Years. For seven years Harry Potter wandered the Magical World. Like a ghost. An echo of a dream. The whispered awe of legend that comes from the mouths of those, for whom, the celebrity and hero, are items for their own curiosity, rather than people who may just wish to take a pleasant stroll down the street.

For seven years he drifted from place to place, with the little child Lily. He absorbed knowledge from the 'Amplitudo Arcus Veneficus', the Grand Archive of Magic. He had studied spells at the knees of old, dusty, wizards. He partook in rituals in the jungle-hidden temples of Tibet, and he dabbled in the modern forms of magic from the American Ministry. He was learned, he was powerful, and he was even a bit worldly. He was rash, he was impulsive, and had not a whit of patience in his rather expansive mind.

All this was why it was quite out of character for him to stand dumbfounded as the egg sailed through the air. Against his instincts he watched as his Ginny (she would always be his Ginny in a way) chirped out that little phrase 'catch', and threw the fated oval at the Shiva. To his credit he wasn't the only member of the motley crew to stand as watch the arching path of the Chimera's off spring. To watch with wide eyes as its flimsy shell cracked and shattered against the dangerous creature's body. The Shiva understood what had happened, however. She understood, what the disaster meant for her. Even if she said not a word, the horror filled eyes and the shocked body spoke in volumes that words couldn't explain.

The Chimera, its maternal instinct raging in full, didn't care who had thrown its egg. It didn't care who had stolen it. At that moment all it cared about was that its unborn child, resting unknowingly in its protective shell, died against the body of the Shiva.

All Hell Broke Loose.

Harry had stood straight and tall as he watched the Killing Curse bear down on him from the tip of Voldemort's wand. He had flown on the winds of Hogwarts as a dragon chased him relentlessly. He had braved the tunnels of Gringotts, to steal an artifact from its protected vaults. Through all of that he had never made the sound he did when he saw the bulk of the Chimera, pounding like a tumbling mountain, rampage towards him, to reach the 'Snake-bitch', as Ginny so cleverly put it.

"Eeep!" Harry managed to squeak out in surprise. He summoned every muscle in his legs and dove to the side. Even then he was not fast enough as the jaws of the dragon head latched around his fleeing leg. Thankfully, one of his wards was still in force and prevented his leg from finding a new home in the beast's belly. The wards didn't prevent the pain from his joints though, as the head shook him like a doll and flung him away, before continuing its charge.

The two great mythical creatures clashed, like the legendary Titans of old. In roars of anger and shrieks of pain, the two dissolved into a jumble of arms, claws, swords, and scales. Viciously tearing into each other in the age-old bid for survival.

Harry however, didn't give a knut for the fortune, or misfortune, of the two. All he knew, or cared about, was that something large and hard stopped his flight with a mind-numbing jolt. He rested dazed for a moment against the cool surface, but only for a moment. When he felt the wet, sickly, mass of foliage wrap around him in a deadly coil he had a panicked moment of realization that it was none other than the Blood Tree that had saved him temporarily.

"Harry!" he dimly heard Ginny's sweet and horrified voice over the raging of the two monsters. His skin burned and itched in a frightful manner as the tree's poisonous vines ate at his protections, eager to begin the quick, but tortuous, process of death and digestion. However, when he had made his impromptu appearance earlier, the Ministry had not thought to ask him to remove any of his magical creations that they had banned from the Tournament. He had, nestle close to his skin, one of the very necklaces that he had conspired to give to Ginny. Of its many protections against spells and curses, its most useful function at the moment, was immunity against poisons



and disease. As such the Blood Tree's vines did little more than burn and bruise his body.

Ginny didn't know this though. All she knew was that her clever little ploy to get the Chimera off her tail had just killed, Harry Potter. With an agonized cry of fury, denial, and despair, she slashed her wand again and again. Several Sectum-Semra spells tore through the vines holding Harry in the distance, dropping him, unceremoniously, to the ground.

She started to rush forward, ignoring the dangers around her to get to Harry, when a hand grabbed her hair and yanked her back. She gave a cry of pain as she felt a good chunk of the red strands pulled from her scalp. She blinked and realized that she was sitting on the ground with one of her fellow contestants leering down at her.

"Now, now, Miss. Weasley," the leering man said, "No need to play the heroine. Potter's already dead. No one lives, once the vines of a Blood Tree touch you." Ginny shivered at the words, and knew them to be true. She looked past the man to see Harry twitching on the ground by the roots. Already more vines, were descending towards the scared, green eyed man, to gain nourishment from his body.

"We still might be able to save him!" she pleaded in denial. "There's always a chance!" The large man chuckled and leveled his wand. She briefly noted that it was rather longer than most wands in circulation. Length tends to add that extra 'oomph' to spells.

"Now why would we want that, when it's you, we are here for?" Ginny understood now. The men were partners with Templeton and Kneveson. Her fists clenched in the damp grass and dirt under her, and her expression grew frosty.

"Not bloody likely," she muttered and brought her foot up with a nasty kick to the groin. Wizard or Muggle, kicks in such places humbled the best of men. His eyes bulged and he dropped to his knees, his wand falling silently to the grass. Ginny rolled to the side and came up with her wand ready.

“Stupefy!” a jet of red light struck another one of the wizards, who was chuckling at his accomplice’s situation. The other three wasted no time in their counter attack. Ginny had to throw up her Caeles shield to block the powerful barrage. She rolled again and came up on her feet, dodging a second round of spells. She ran towards Harry, pausing momentarily to kick the large man, whom she had just neutered, in the face. Her legs were strong from her daily running routine, and from she feel of the kick, she had broken his nose and put the man out of the fight for a bit.

She continued to run towards the Blood Tree, not giving a damn about the dangers it posed. The men behind her took the time to revive their stunned partner and sent another wave of spells at the fleeing red head. The spells were blocked, however, by battle between the Chimera and the Shiva, which had moved too close to the group, and the assailants were forced to scatter as the fight blocked their aim of Ginny.

She couldn’t seem to get in close enough to pull Harry from the Tree’s grasp though. Those alien, decayed, fetid tentacles writhed in the air to try and grab her as well. It was luck that she slipped trying to avoid them, for if she hadn’t one of them would have found her and ended her life.

“Harry!” she screamed. “Please answer me!” She prayed with every syllable uttered that he was somehow, miraculously, okay. Her prayers were answered as she saw him lift his arms to try and pry the predatory things from around his torso and neck.

“Ginny...” he gasped out. “Cut me loose.” Ginny gave a sob of relief and even laughed a bit, blinking away the tears in her eyes. A second later she had Harry down and was about to summon him away from the Tree when something slammed into the back of her shoulder. She screamed as she felt the bones in her arm shatter and crumble under the strength of the spell. She fell to the ground in pain, the fall avoiding another Bone breaking charm that would have literally, caved in the back of her skull.

She looked back to see the four wizards striding towards her, with fury written all over their faces. She couldn’t seem to focus on a spell

as the pain from her broken shoulder seemed every ounce of concentration from her.

“Nice run, Weasley,” one of them snarled as they got closer. “But it’s over. Enough games. We win.”

“Oi! No you don’t! The Eggs mine!” a voice called far to the left. Everyone turned to see three other contestant running flat out towards the five and Ginny. She would have laughed if the situation wasn’t so dire. The regular Maze participants had arrived. They wouldn’t let anyone else steal their glory without a fight. The glum grassy field lit up in a rainbow of spells as the three new comers launched their attack. None too soon, the entire area was a battlefield. Between the three newcomers, the five assassins, and the Chimera and Shiva ripping away at each other, no one noticed, broken little Ginny, once more cut Harry free and summon him to her side.

“Harry?” she asked softly, brushing the hair out of his eyes and cradling her arm.

“I’m ok,” he rasped, his throat, soar and bruised from the vines. He struggled to sit up and pushed his glasses further up his nose.

“Ginny, you’re arm!” he exclaimed and reached out to touch her shoulder. She winced away and grit her teeth from the fresh wave of pain.

“It’s broken. One of those spell-hurling dung-bats caught me when I wasn’t looking. I’ll be alright. The real question is how are you ok? The poison should have killed you.” Harry patted his chest.

“Necklace. The same one that Hermione had you wear, before they made you take it off. It protects against almost all poisons.” Ginny blinked.

“Oh...you cheated!” she accused, looking rather indignant. Harry blinked and then scowled.

“It’s a good thing I did, or I’d be dead right now thrice over! Anyways,” he said looking over her shoulder at the confusion of the battle. “We

really need to get out of here Ginny. Those men are paid to kill you. They don't care about winning. We should go."

He looked so serious and concerned, but Ginny wasn't ready to forgive him and she wasn't about to give up on the Maze, just cause things got harder and more complicated.

"The only way I am leaving the Maze is apparating out with the three wands. Damn, the dangers. I spent countless hours preparing for this thing. I'm not giving up!" Her eyes blazed with resolve. Her stubborn mind firmly rooted in place. Harry knew that look all too well. He saw it every time his eyes closed. Every day of his self imposed exile. He remembered thinking one time, while lying in his house in America, that he'd fight Voldemort all over again, to see her look at him like that.

"Well if it isn't Voldemort, then I guess it will be this Bloody Tree," he muttered, pun intended. Ginny looked at him in confusion.

"What?" she asked.

"Never mind, inside joke." he then stood up and brushed himself off. "First thing to do is make sure you can't get hurt climbing the thing. If you want to do this, then you do it. I'll tell you how to go about it, but you gotta do it on your own."

Ginny gave up a bit of her anger at him to favor him with a grateful smile. He understood that she was doing this not for the reward, but to prove to friends and family, and the Wizarding World in general, that she was a witch to be reckoned with and respected.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered. He nodded and flicked his wand, blocking a stray spell that was sent their way.

"Here," he said and tapped her shoulder lightly with his wand. She felt a soothing warmth flow from the spot he touched down to her fingertips. He then waved his wand again and a splint and sling was holding her arm steady and in place.

“I’ve numbed the pain and stopped the broken bones from grinding against each other. They aren’t fixed and you’ll have to see a real healer-” he paused to block another spell. “When you get done.”

“Ok, what do I do?” she asked him, cutting to the chase.

“First, there is a fruit that the Tree has. It only blooms in the top most branches, where the leaves are red. You can’t get up the tree without the fruit. Keep firing blasting and bashing charms at the top till you knock a couple down. Once you have the fruit, eat as much as you can. It has a coppery taste and is kind of bitter, but make sure you eat a good portion of it including the...juice.” His mouth twisted when he said ‘juice’. Ginny wondered about that, but didn’t interrupt.

Then you have to make your way up the tree. Don’t use fire spells. The worst you will do is attract more of its attention. Stick to cutting curses and jinxes. I don’t know if you have a way to levitate or fly without a broom, but if you don’t use the spider climb charm to get up there. It’s your safest bet with that shoulder.”

“Spider climb charm?” Ginny frowned.

“Errrr, you don’t know that spell?” she shook her head. “Hmmm, well it’s an easy charm. It’s not from base Latin and the Pantheon Era. It’s Egyptian. The incantation is ‘Alyshi Hasseem’. No mental preparation needed. Got it?”

“Yeah. Alyshe Hasseem”

“No, Alyshi, strong ‘i’.”

“Ok, lets do this...what...what are you going to do Harry?”

“Me?” he grinned. “I’m gonna make sure everyone is paying attention to me and ignoring you.”

“Ummm, Harry, don’t do anything stupid. You don’t need to make a scene.” She had a rather queasy feeling in her gut.

“Ah, come on Gin! You know me! I hate making a scene.” For a brief second she wanted to kiss him. Then she saw his grin grow wider and wanted to slap it off his annoying, arrogant, face.

“Fine then Potter, do whatever you want.” her voice took on an indifferent tone, pulling away from the casual concerned tone she had just used. Harry’s face fell and he gave an uncertain nod.

‘Women,’ he thought, ‘can’t keep a straight emotion for more than a minute.’ He wasn’t stupid enough to say that out loud. His memory living as a cow was still too fresh in his mind. He made a note to speak to her about that later on.

“Ok, then. Remember, get the fruit, eat it all, and use cutting or banishing curses. No fire. Got it?” Ginny gave a nod and stood up with some aid from the bespectacled man.

“Be careful, Harry,” she pinned him in place with one of her ‘looks’. “Don’t die. We have ‘things’ to discuss.”

Harry flinched and looked to the ground, giving her a submissive nod. When she felt he was suitably put down she turned towards the tree to begin her task of gaining the fruit.

Harry looked up and watched her fondly for a moment, before turning back towards the battle. His eyes sought the Shiva and Chimera, both in bloody, heaving strips, circling each other. He then heard Ginny shouting ‘Reducto’, behind him and analyzed the Wizarding battle. In all the time Ginny and him had been speaking, no one had been ‘put out of commission’, so to speak. Ineptitude at its finest.

“Honestly,” he muttered, “Doesn’t anyone know how to duel?” He gripped his wand tightly and started to wade into the battle. “I guess class is in session.”

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"I can't believe the nerve of that girl!" Molly raged as the family watched Ginny throw the egg at the Shiva. The Maze was even more eventful than anyone had ever thought possible. It was a battle of power and ingenuity that was for certain. Hermione had no clue, what had possessed Ginny to steal the Chimera egg and run for the Tree. It was suicidal and only luck kept her alive.

Ron was beside himself in a mixture of fright and mirth. Ron, Charlie and George had collapsed in gales of laughter when she threw the Egg at the Shiva. Molly turned her wrath on her three laughing sons and just folded her arms, glaring down the length of her nose. Bill prudently elbowed the three of them and coughed discreetly. The three boys noticed their mother's look and promptly settled down. Everyone turned from the amusing sight of the three chastised men as the crowd screamed in fear.

What Hermione saw made her leap to her feet with a cry, and cover her mouth in horror. Harry was entangled in the poisonous vines of the tree, something that meant sure death unless treated within a minute. No one could get to him in time. Molly started to scream and flew into the embrace of her husband. Ron however looked slightly amused and shook Hermione out of her terrified shock. He leaned over to whisper in her ear and she looked between her husband and Harry in amazement.

"But-the rules-they took-Oh!" she suddenly realized. She placed a shaking hand over her racing heart and breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's ok mum," she heard Ron tell his mother. "Harry's ok, the poison won't hurt him."

"How can you be sure Ron?" Molly tearfully asked. He just winked at her and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Oh I'm sure the man who makes all sorts of nifty things for Aurors, would be bound to have a few items to protect him." Molly didn't look entirely convinced, but calmed down to anxiously watch the fight play out.

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Ginny did her best to ignore the battle raging behind her as she flung spell after spell into the far reaches of the Blood Tree. The cacophony of incantations and the haze of smoke however, were doing a fine job in distracting her. The fact that the fruit she needed couldn't be seen in the towering top just added to her annoyance. She didn't have much time and she could spend hours trying to knock the little pieces of victory down. So she paused in her spells to think of a solution.

She couldn't use fire to get rid of the leaves blocking her view and she was wasting time and energy trying to hit something with a blasting or banishing curse. So how could she knock some of the fruit down? She would need something big that packed a punch. She did a quick run down of her magical arsenal and realized that she didn't have anything to get the job done. She stamped her foot in frustration and blew a bang out of her eyes. This was impossible. She took a look behind her and blinked as she saw Harry whistling while throwing around bits of chaos of everything. She thought she saw what even looked like an ostrich or two running around in circles, just to cause confusion. She shook the image out of her head and tried to refocus on the task at hand. Harry doing some silly transfiguration wasn't her concern right now.

Her eyes popped open. Transfiguration. Of course. She didn't have a weapon big enough, but that wasn't to say she couldn't make one. It was a rather simple piece of magic that most people learned in their third year at Hogwarts. Inanimate to Inanimate transfiguration was a cinch. She gave a cheek grin as her resolve and confidence was bolstered anew. First she needed something to work with.

She took a stock of the area, searching for something with suitable mass and size. There was nothing. Twisting her lips in a wry frown, she guessed there was only one thing to do. Tear a good chunk of wood from the devilish plant in front of her. Oh course calling the Tree a plant was akin to calling a blast-end-skewert a cricket. Totally inappropriate. She really didn't care though.



“Hope you’re ready. This is really going to hurt.” She gave another smirk and jabbed her wand forward. A thin orange beam connected with the trunk and the Tree went crazy. The vines flailed around like a mad man waving his arms frantically. The leaves, both green, orange and red shuddered and swayed. It didn’t take long for Ginny to get the reaction she was hoping for. The ground in front of her started to buckle upwards in a path straight towards her.

“There we go,” she muttered and jumped out of the way as a thick root shot up from the damp earth, where she had just been standing. Ginny wasted no time and used the strongest severing curse she knew.

“Infundus!” a jet of white-hot spell fire lanced through the iron hard bark like a knife through butter. A thick chunk, about the size of her head, fell to the grass with a thud. The root that had tried to attack her quivered and slunk away. Well, she supposed, forcing the thing into retreat was a small victory in itself.

With a wave of that powerful tool, that Witches and Wizards had dubbed, the wand, the thick severed piece of root morphed into a large heavy boulder. Something that size and heavy was bound to have some success. She swished her wand and gave a casual flick in the air and the rock rose a couple feet off the ground.

“Ha! Eat that, Felicity Kittridge!” she cried, referring to an annoying Ravenclaw in her first year who had given the class all sorts of hell when learning their first spell. With some deft wand twisting and some concentration the obscenely large rock flew through the air and into the dimly red shade of the Blood Tree. She put on a little extra speed and then waved her arm in wide and strong sweeps. The boulder shook the branches as it crashed repeatedly against them from her unplanned movement.

She was sweating from the effort of holding that much weight aloft, but a few moments later she saw not one, but four pieces of fruit bouncing from branch to branch like a ball down a set of stairs. She sighed in relief and sent the Boulder off into the distance and let it drop, where it wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“Accio Fruit,” she uttered softly, too tired to put the effort into a silent summon. One zoomed into her outstretched hand. It had a curious feeling to it. The fruit was a deep red and very soft. Almost like a pillow, but heavy as well. She ran her hands over the smooth texture and liked the feel. It was as smooth as a baby’s skin. With a rueful glance at the waiting tree she lifted it to her lips.

“Cheers.” she said and bit into the fruit. The inside was as soft as the outside and extremely juicy. Like Harry said, it had a coppery, but was sweet and yet bitter. Oh and it was thick and rich. Very thick and rich. Wasting no more time, she swallowed and took another bite, and then another. In less than a minute the large red thing was devoured and Ginny tossed the core away, an odd light red thing with several tubes that extended from it into the fruit.

She could feel the warm fuzzy feeling in her stomach, but it still made her a bit nauseous and her vision swam a little. She willed away the lingering effects and tapped herself on the head.

“Alyshi Hasseem” she incanted and felt the added effects of the spider climb charm on herself. It was good thing that she had strong leg and stomach muscles, because this was going to be a long and tortuous process. She readied herself and began to walk up the tree, cutting away the few vines that reached out to ensnare her. A few more minutes and she would finish the Grand Merlin Maze.

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As Harry waded into the battle, he decided to have some fun. He’s had his share of battles, but usually they had his life on the line. He knew no one would dare even try to kill him in view of so many Ministries. Regardless if they could make it look like an accident, he knew his status would put their head on a pole.

First, to set up some distractions and a bit of chaos he conjured some chairs and transfigured them into a variety of odd animals, ordering them to run around. Such oddities would always distract someone at the wrong time and were a favorite tactic of his. He then turned on his ‘stern father look’, as Lily would always tell him when he got angry. The gloves were off for him. These men had threatened Ginny, and

he was going to make an example of them to whoever was watching. Most likely that strange gathering of wizards he had glimpsed when they tried to use a dark identity spell on him.

That particular incident had almost caused him to blow himself up, as he was in a critical part of a potion when they had attacked. The potion was ruined, wasting two weeks of work, but he was alive at least. Now these, assassins, were after Ginny and he wanted to give them a little pay back.

"Illum'hi Shaunti!" he pointed his wand at the large man, who now sported a broken nose. No one had noticed his entrance into the battle until then, as several golden rings were conjured around the man, stripping him of his magic. It was an old spell of ancient Babylonian make, one that could break through most barriers, and when they touched a magic user, that person couldn't so much as levitate a feather for a day in addition to binding and silencing them. With a stunned expression he fell to the ground and everyone paused to look at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Get 'em!" one of the men yelled. Oh, Harry had expected everyone to gang up on him. Maybe a few, but not all of them. Not good. He took advantage of the momentary indecision on all their faces and threw up a shield and sent an army of stunning spells at the assassins. He would ignore the three unknowns for now. Chances were they were just regular old blokes in the wrong place. One of the other men was hit by his poorly aimed stunners dropping the total to deal with to three.

One of the three newcomers it turned out was an animagus. The man had morphed into a large tiger of all things before bounded across the way, roaring his challenge. Fortunately, Harry could care less when someone turned into an animal as they were then susceptible to certain spells. In fact it was an advantage for him this time rather than a nuisance.

"Advertum Homeno!" he incanted and the charging tiger suddenly turned in direction and pounced on one of the assassins, much to the man's painful surprise. He heard the sickening crunch of an arm

being bit into and the body flung away by the powerful jaws of the animagus form. Four more to deal with, including the newcomers.

Harry threw up another shield as a couple of incendiary spells were hurled at him. He noted that the two assassins left were focusing their attention on the morphed tiger now. That left the two new comers. Well they wanted his attention and a crack at the killer of Voldemort, so they would get it. Harry started to weave his wand in a huge circular pattern in front of him. The first pass created a ring of red fire in the air. The second turned the ring a dazzling yellow and the third into a blazing, scorching blue. Clenching his wand hand into a fist, he punched at the air in the center of the fiery ring.

The ring bulleted through the space between him and the two newcomers and then split into three. They hit the ground in front of the wizards and a line of discordant fire exploded, lighting up the night with various hues. The raging wall of fire flared and grew larger. Harry pointed his wand at it and cupped his hand towards it, as if to hold something illusionary in his hand. He then rolled his wand over and over in a tight spiral to point towards the two assassins and the tiger, in the midst of their battle. The tiger animagus wasn't doing to well, as it was trying to run away. At his direction the spelled fire churned and rolled through the air, the tendrils of flame licking and reaching out like the heads of a hydra as Harry directed its path. The two assassins looked on in shocked fear as the wave of multi-hued fire fell upon them. Harry let them feel a couple of seconds of burning pain before he dispelled it, leaving them blistered and writhing along the ground. The tiger animagus was no where to be found.

Harry smiled in satisfaction as the battlefield was clear of other wizards. He took a glance at the shadowed pathways to see if anyone else was lurking in the corners. He let himself have a deep sigh. It was finally over. Soon Ginny would have the final wand and the Maze would be over.

A 'whooshing' sound caused him to instinctively leap aside. A quaking thud of something landing heavily behind him almost knocked him on his feet. He turned around to see what had almost hit him and saw the bloody and dead Chimera left in tattered rags on the ground. 'Oh great.' he thought with resignation. He looked across the

torn battlefield to the Shiva. She wasn't in much better shape than the Chimera she had killed, that was for sure. She was missing two arms on her left side and her skin was a mess of bleeding furrows and holes from the teeth and claws of her adversary.

"Oh come on!" Harry yelled at her. "You can't really mean to fight me in that condition! Don't throw your life away!" The Naga Queen just slithered slowly towards him, her eyes lit with pain and insanity. The battle must have broken her and sent her into a berserker rage. Harry closed his eyes, with what he had to do. He hadn't killed anything in a long time. Maybe he could just incapacitate the Shiva. She was close to dead anyways. Opening his eyes again he pointed towards the ground

"Serpensortia!" Three large snakes erupted from the tip of his wand, landing on the ground with an angry slither. The Shiva took this as the beginnings of an attack and moved faster. Her large, thick tail straining to move her along with the pain of her wounds. She wasn't nearly as fast as she normally was and gave Harry time to prepare his defense.

"Engorgio." he said again and the three snakes swelled in size to almost twelve feet long each. Harry looked at the snakes and drew on a power he rarely used and often hated. Parseltongue.

"Defend me." he told the conjured serpents. The three hissed and threw their heads around from the command, but quickly fell to Harry's domination. They rose and coiled to meet the Shiva head on. The old beast of muggle myth halted in her advance and swung a sword quickly as the snakes struck out. Harry grimaced as a head went tumbling away and one of his defenders faded into nothingness. She wasn't quick enough to stop the other two however and she hissed as powerful jaws clamped down on an arm. She tried to fling it away, but quick as lightning the second struck as well pinning another arm and its long powerful body quickly coiled around her.

The Shiva gasped as a breath was squeezed out of her from a powerful contraction. The first followed the second's example and coiled around her neck. Splatters of blood flew everywhere as she flung her body back and forth in a vain attempt to free herself, but she

lacked the strength. Harry watched in sadness as her flailing began to slow and her pale skin began to turn blue from lack of oxygen and the stress from the snakes.

He hated to take away such a majestic and ancient beings pride away like this, but it was between his life and hers. He wouldn't kill her, but he doubted she would thank him for the mercy. Things such as she never took defeat well and often considered death a better recourse. Eventually her eyes fluttered and rolled into the back of her head, bulged and red with blood and pressure. She raised a single free hand into the air, almost imploringly towards something unseen and then toppled to the side. Harry quickly banished his conjurations and strode to the Shiva warily.

Normally the spell he was about to perform would be no use on her if she was awake and in her prime, but unconscious and injured, her mental defenses were almost non existent.

"Totalum Sopor," he whispered. The spell sent the creature into a deep coma, to rest and heal from her injuries. The same spell that Ginny had used on Kneveson. "Rest well and awake back home. Maybe you'll think it was just a bad dream." He hoped that, but doubted it.

He took a last survey of the field and decided that the Maze was all but done with. He turned and looked up at the Tree to see the tiny form of Ginny, almost at the top.

"Well done Gin," he whispered with a smile. A feeling of pride for his once girl-friend swelling in his chest.

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Ginny ached in every muscle of her body. This would have been much easier if she had use of both her arms. Fate however, decided that was not to be her lot in life and made this more difficult than it already was. Holding your body straight as you walked vertically up a tree was an extreme test of muscle strength. If she had not kept in such good shape from her Quidditch, she doubted she would have been able to do it.

At the moment she was resting on a thick branch, absently cutting away the few vines that were this high into its branches. Every now and then she would have to move or pull herself away from the Tree. The truck itself would become malleable and try to pull her inside to be digested. When it first tried that, it was one of the most unsettling and strangest feelings she had ever had. It was like hard rock softening and sliding through her. Needless to say, it wasn't an experience she would ever wish to go through again.

Time was against her. She had maybe ten or fifteen minutes left to finish and she was almost there. She could see the shining light of the final wand floating in some sort of bubble in the center of the high foliage. Just twenty more feet and she would be able to walk along the thick mass and grab it.

She took a few deep breaths and struggled to her feet. If anyone had ever tried to stand on an uneven surface with one arm, they would know that it was pretty awkward. She recast the spider climb charm and placed a foot on the trunk. It was now or never. She began the last arduous steps towards victory and rest.

Her limbs shook with the strain and she almost fell backwards and down to the ground, but sheer will power kept her from doing so. She took a few more steps and had to bat away a branch that seemed to move and shift to block her way. A few more steps and a fierce wind buffeted around her. Thorny leaves broke away and scratched at her skin, burning with their poison. She growled and cast a light shielding charm to protect her and took some more steps. Sweat poured down her face like a broken dam and she whimpered from the pain in her calves. Five feet. Just five miserable feet and she could right herself for the last time. She took two more steps. Three feet. Another step. Two feet. She leaned up and grasped the final thick platform. The final step.

With a cry of relief and pleasure she pulled herself over the edge and collapsed on her stomach. She had made it. She had reached the top. Against her better judgment she glanced over the side and looked down. She was hundreds of feet up and the ground looked like a green mosaic blotched with brown craters. She began to laugh,

almost hysterically. Her gaze turned to the sides and in the distance she could see the stands surrounding the maze. They looked like a wall of moving ants seen from a distance, and the floating white glows of the monitors looked like tiny fireflies bouncing in the air. Taking some deep breaths she struggled to her feet.

The hum of the bubble, guarding the wand, was a song to her ears. She took a moment to admire the fine craftsmanship of the object. Like the other wands this one was wrought in gold, but wrapped in silvery strands. A beautiful piece. She reached for the wand, and felt the tingle as her hand passed through the spell field. Her fingers wrapped around the delicate object and pulled it out. She glanced around warily, half expecting some new menace or curse, or worse yet, the tree to crumble beneath her. Everything was fine however, and it seemed the damned creators of the Maze figured just reaching the top was enough. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"I win." she whispered and twisted her body quickly. Her body squeezed through a hole in space the size of a key hole. With a loud crack she was pulled away and appeared in the goal, surrounded by Aurors and medical staff.

"I present to you the winner of the Grand Merlin Maze. Ginny Weasley!" the voice of the minister, magically amplified, shouted to the crowd. The roar that followed caused her to flinch, but still keep a beaming and proud smile on her face. She didn't notice the Aurors apparating away and bringing back the rest of the surviving contestants, or the bustle of the healers trying to lead her away to get medical attention. Like a tree falling slowly she crumbled to her knees and fell face first into the ground. Her vision dimming as she passed out. She could finally rest.

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A/N - There you go, the end of the Maze. I hope people were impressed and delighted over the idea. I've read many stories with dueling competitions, but nothing like an advanced for the the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I've always thought the final challenge to seem



rather simple and wanted to explore a real deadly challenge. This was it. Of course I had loads of other stuff in there and plenty of ideas, but couldn't fit everything in without making the chapters too wordy and long. There is only so many challenges, creatures and things someone can read about before becoming bored with the stuff, so I had to narrow it down. Plus, between you and me, I didn't want to use all my ideas about the wonders of a magical world just yet.

Until next chapter,

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Oh, AND READ THAT STORY I TOLD YOU ABOUT! YOU'LL LIKE IT!!

## Chapter 10

### And the Song Shall Set You Free

“She’ll be fine, mum, honestly.”

“I can’t believe she won. I’m so proud of her.”

“The Minister wants to know when she’ll wake up, so he can present the award to her.”

Those were the scratches of conversation Ginny heard in the haze of her gaining consciousness. She felt like she was in a dream-like state, rising up from the depths of a deep black sleep. As her mind slowly became more and more aware she kept her eyes closed, almost afraid to open them. Had it all been a dream? Had she really won her way through the Maze? Slowly she peeked open her eyes to see if she could spot who was speaking. Her vision was blurry and she blinked rapidly to try and clear away the deep sleep that still lingered. She could start to make out the mass of red that hovered over her. It could only have been her, rather large, family.

“Ginny? Oh thank Merlin, your awake!” she heard her mother say with the fond, overbearing concern, she used with all of her children. Always one to fret over the smallest things, she never passed up an opportunity to show her boundless love to each and every one of them.

Ginny struggled to sit up, but a sharp pain caused her to flinch and groan, and she had to settle back down on whatever soft surface she was laying on. Her entire body ached. Her shoulders felt tight and her legs were cramped. Even her eyes hurt from magical exhaustion.

“Where am I?” she asked. Last thing she remembered was the drowning sheers from the spectators and then feeling the ground rush up to claim her.

“You’re in one of the changing rooms of the stadium sweetheart,” her father told her, “You passed out and were brought here to recover.”

"How long have I been out?" she asked again and once more her father responded.

"Maybe ten minutes at most. They gave you some replenishment potions and healed your shoulder and other wounds. You were in quite a state, if I may say so." Ginny grinned a bit and looked around to her small army of brothers. George was beaming one of his winsome smiles at her and Ron had his arm around Hermione. Charlie and Bill were maybe ten feet away talking with an Auror and a Healer. She didn't see Percy though.

"Did I really win? It seems like a dream."

"Yup!" Ron beamed with pride and enthusiasm. "You were great Gin! The way you threw that egg at that snake woman-"

"Shiva." Hermione corrected him.

"Err, right. The way you threw that egg at the Shiva was sheer brilliance! Then you hurled the boulder into the tree and 'WHAM!' those fruits fell down! You were a star out there Gin. You should become an Auror!" Ron was almost bouncing on his heels in his excitement. Hermione was silent with concern and gave a reproachful glance at her husband.

"As your tactless brother so elegantly stated," Hermione said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "You did really well Ginny, even if you were a bit reckless at times." Ginny merely rolled her eyes. Everything was reckless when it came to danger, from Hermione's point of view.

"Next thing I want to know is; what about those wizards that attacked me? Did you guys see them? What's gonna to happen to them?" Ginny really hoped the lot of them would be sent to Azkaban.

"We aren't sure yet." Ron told her with a cringe and an angry scowl on his face. "You see we couldn't hear what was said. The ground by the tree didn't really do anything against the rules, but the two men at the sand pit will probably be brought up on charges for attempted murder and hauled away to Azkaban."

“Not against the rules?!” Ginny raged and sat up, ignoring the protest her body sent her. “The berks tried to kill me! They were specifically sent to kill me in fact! How is that not against the rules?” She was fuming. Her mother and father both had grim looks on their faces at the news. They weren’t aware of that fact. Ron seemed to go into ‘Auror mode’ however and took a step closer to her.

“They were sent to kill you? Are you sure?” he asked.

“Of course I am. They told me so. Boasted about it even!”

“This changes things then. I’m not sure how it will turn out. Tell us more Gin, I need to know everything.”

So Gin went into a lengthy explanation of the Maze and her encounters with the group of men who were hunting her. She told her family all about how Templeton wanted to feed her to the Sand Worm. She went into graphic detail of what the group at the clearing of the Blood Tree told her, she repeated their words almost verbatim. She was almost shorting when she was done and drew the attention of a Healer who made his way over.

“Well, you seem to have gained some of you’re energy back, Miss. Weasley. How are you feeling?” The chubby elder man said.

“I’m tired and I hurt.” she told him rather curtly. How did he think she felt?

“Ah, well that’s to be expected with your injuries. Here, “He drew two small potions from his pockets, “Take these and you should be back hurling hexes in moments.”

“What are they?” Ginny asked with suspicion. For all she knew, this healer was in on whatever conspiracy she had gotten herself into.

“Just a simple pepper-up and pain relieving potion. A little energy boost is all you need. There was nothing really seriously wrong with you, just the broken arm.” Ginny opened the bottles and sniffed them. Both seemed to be in order. They were common potions

administered after a game after all, and she was well acquainted with them. She took the potions and thanked the healer. She sighed in pleasure as she felt the pain subside and her limbs loosen up. She shook her head a bit too clear away the steam that had shot from her ears. When she felt better she looked at Ron once the healer left.

“So what do you think?”

“I’m not sure Gin.” her brother told her. “I’ve seen this type of thing before. We need to figure out why they wanted to kill you. I didn’t want to tell you this, but while you were in the Maze someone broke into your apartment and trashed the place.”

“WHAT?!” all the women of the Weasley family exclaimed, including Hermione. Ginny felt her anger boil over.

“HOW DARE THEY?!” She yelled, ignoring the attention she was getting from the other patients and the Aurors. She slowly calmed down.

“What did they do Ron?” Hermione asked for Ginny, seeming to read the girls mind.

“Well, when I disappeared earlier, sorry for lying ‘bout that by the way, I went to Ginny’s apartment. I set some wards in place a little while ago in case anyone tried to break in. They went off during the Maze and I left the stadium to investigate as soon as possible. When I got there, the place was a mess. I’m not entirely sure, but it seems whoever it was, was looking for something.”

“Did you get them?” Ginny asked. Ron shook his head.

“I was too late. It was like a hurricane went through there. Don’t worry, I set everything back to normal and repaired the damage.” he placated to Ginny, who was about to start into another rant.

“Who the hell would do that? And why does someone want me dead?” Ginny bit her lip and looked off into the distance.

"We aren't sure Ginny." Hermione said, just as curious as Ginny. "Maybe Harry will know. He seemed to expect that there would be trouble today."

"Harry!" Ginny looked around anxiously. She had forgotten all about him. Now that she was reminded, the entire ordeal rushed back to her and she almost swooned with the memories and the feelings. "Where is he? Is he ok?"

"Ginny! Calm down!" George told her and chuckled a bit. "The magical tyrant, formally known as Harry Potter, is fine" He took on a dramatic pose, like some famous story teller, and waved his arms around dramatically.

"He assaulted the armies of darkness with terrifying powers and drowned them in a sea of fire! Then in the final moments the monster, once thought dead, rose up and tried, once more, to slay the Hero, only to fall prey finally to his power!"

Ginny blinked. "What?" Her father chuckled and patted her shoulder.

"What George means, is that Harry fought the wizards off, but had a bit of a tuffle with the Shiva. He won, but it was close. He used some impressive magic, but in the end, he's fine. Don't worry."

"Worry?" Ginny's eyes grew dangerous as her mood suddenly shifted. "I'm not worried. I just want to make sure he has some semblance of life left, so I can end it myself!" she spat out, her voice hissing with venomous hate. Her father frowned and drew back and everyone looked down and shifted uncomfortably.

"Ginny," Hermione started to say, but was interrupted by Ginny's raised hand.

"Don't! Don't make excuses for that bastard. He doesn't deserve excuses, praise or kindness. We all went through hell after he ran out on us and he just shows up like this after seven years. We didn't hear a word from him during that time. Just hints, whispers and rumors. I won't forgive him, nor will I forgive anyone else that does. Understand?" She sent her glare towards her family, who all had the

tenacity to look ashamed. They all seemed to be happy that he was back, rather than angry that he had left.

They were all saved, however, by the Minister, who strode into the room like a powerful force. His tall and imposing, yet kind presence drew everyone one's eyes.

"Ginny!" he said as he arrived at her bed. "I'm glad you're awake." He smiled and gave a nod to all his old friends from the Order of the Phoenix.

"Minister." Ginny said politely, but he was having none of that.

"Now, Now. None of that. How many times have I told you over holiday dinners to call me Kingsley? We all fought and bled together. No formalities between friends."

Ginny gave a laugh, her sour mood dissipating. "Ok, Kingsley. How are you? Everything go ok with your end of the Maze?"

"Oh yes, everything went fine, a few problems with some of the wards, but nothing too serious. I wanted to say congratulations on your win, and to ask if you're up to finishing this all up and receiving your prize."

"Well yes, but first I want to know what's going to happen to the wizards who attacked me." Kingsley took grim and angry as he answered.

"Kneveson and Templeton, their names by the way, have already received medical treatment and are at the ministry pending trial for attempted murder. Stunning someone is one thing, but from what I was told they tried to drag you into the lair of the sand worm to be eaten. That was a blatant breach of the rules and attempted murder. I'll make sure they are safe in Azkaban for a long while."

"That's fine and dandy for those two," Molly rose, up in all her fury as only a mother could show, "But what about the others! The group in the clearing also tried to kill my daughter. I demand justice Kingsley! You had better get to the bottom of this!"

The minister took a step back and looked around the group in confusion. "They other group?" he asked. "I thought they were just fellow contestants working together." Ginny barked out a cynical laugh.

"Oh, no. They were in on the whole thing with that Templeton character. They only entered the Maze to try and kill me. They told me themselves that they were paid to make sure I wouldn't make it out alive."

"What?" Kingsley snarled. The old days of his fighting spirit and skills as the Ministry's top Auror shone once more. "I didn't know what. Are you sure they said that Ginny? They were supposed to kill you?" Ginny gave a nod through pursed lips.

"This changes things. It adds conspiracy to commit murder as well as attempted to the charges. I'll get to the bottom of this Molly, don't worry. Ron?" he turned to the silent man behind him.

"I don't think I have enough sir, but we are running out of time. It's obviously connected to the attempt on Ginny. I have to move now."

Everyone looked confused as the Minister and Ron stared at each other for a moment. Finally Kingsley gave a sharp nod.

"Do it. I only hope it's enough."

"Ron?" Hermione spoke up. "What is he talking about?" Ron sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"Well, it's a long story, but I was never fired. It was a cover up so I could move undercover on a rather important case. Something that Ginny is connected to. I still can't go into details, but I promise I'll explain everything late. The point is I'm still an Auror."

Hermione squealed with joy and jumped onto her husband with a bear tight hug. "Oh that's wonderful! I'm so glad!"



"That's good to know Ron," Ginny stated dryly, "But what does this mysterious case have to do with me and people wanting to kill me?"

"I'll tell you everything later Gin, but right now I think you got a phoenix to claim."

"Oh." Ginny said simply, her eyes going wide with the thought. She had forgotten about the prize she had won. She turned to the Minister.

"Do I really get it? Is it really a phoenix egg?" She whispered in a kind of awed, disbelieving hope. Kingsley gave a booming laugh and nodded.

"Yes you do, and yes it is. You earned it. You're the first resident of England in sixty years to bond with a phoenix. The last, being Albus, of course. So shall we go?"

"Yes! Of course!" Ginny threw off the sheet that covered her and jumped off the bed. The blood rush from the sudden changing of position caused her to swoon a bit, but Kingsley held her by the elbow, stopping her from falling over.

"By the way," the Minister asked, "Where is Harry? After we took him out of the Maze he seemed to have snuck off. I'd like to talk to him and the reporters are practically rabid for an interview."

Ginny gave a cool toss of her hair and shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. Personally, I hope he left again and doesn't show his face around here anymore."

Kingsley looked towards Arthur in confusion. He just frowned and shook his head slightly, warning the Minister off any further questions.

"I see..." It was obvious that he didn't. "Well then, let's get on with it."

The Minister of Magic, flanked by two Aurors, led the family out of the converted changing room. As soon as they were past the door they could hear the crowd and the clamoring of the reporters at the end of the stretch of tunnel they were in. Normally Ginny would have been a frightful mess of nerves, but next to the Maze and the life or death

struggle she had just went through, standing in from of a naïve crowd and intrusive reporters didn't seem much of a problem.

As they reached the mouth of the tunnel she had to shield her eyes slightly from the blinding flashes of the cameras going off in front of her. It seemed that every flash bulb in existence was lit in front of her at once. Her eye site was swimming in various colors as she blinked away the temporary blindness. Kingsley chuckled at her and gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Miss Weasley, how do you feel about your victory?" "Miss Weasley, how do you feel about Harry Potter showing up to save you?" "Miss Weasley, what are your plans with the Phoenix Eggs?"

Dozens of reporters started to rattle off question after questions. Quick quote quills were everywhere, like a hive of bees scratching away at parchments. The Minister had paused to allow her to answer some of the questions, but her mouth flopped like a fish out of water in a vain attempt to sort out the words. One reporter, a fair faced witch in a rather pretty green robe gave her a question that she was happy to answer.

"Ginevra, how do you think witches in general will be viewed now that you won the Grand Merlin Maze against some forty off wizards?" Ginny had to smile and the reporters calmed down enough to hear her answer.

"Some of the most notable names in History have always been wizards, while powerful or famous witches are rarely heard about and briefly discussed. I hope that the Ministry and the Magical World in general will now realize that it isn't the sex or blood that matters, but the magic that we all have. I hope that we will see more witches in positions of leadership and in Law Enforcement. Some of the best and brightest magic users have been witches, and the fact that so many people don't know their names or accomplishments is a sad thing that needs to be corrected."

"Miss Weasley, can you give us some examples?" another witch asked.

“Besides two of Hogwart’s founders, some that are alive today are Natasha Zimmerman, a magical theorist. Georgia Haggerset, a brilliant politician. England’s very own spell theorist. And most notable Minerva McGonagall, the first ever female headmaster of Hogwarts. There are hundred’s of other witches out there as brilliant as the ones I have named, but rarely known. Only progress and better magic can be accomplished by paying more attention to these brilliant and accomplished minds. It only harms us all by overlooking them. Thank you for your questions.”

A few more reporters tried to get some questions in, but Kingsley deflected them and led Ginny away through the crowd.

“That was very well done, Ginny. I’m very impressed.” he told her. She felt a flush of pleasure at his approval and gave a charming little blush.

“It’s nothing. It’s one of the reasons I entered the Maze in the first place.”

“I think it was the best reason of all to enter. You should go into politics with a tongue and ideals such as you just showed.” Ginny laughed and shook her head.

“Oh no. You won’t catch me like that. I saw what my dad went through, what Ron goes through. and what it did to Percy. I’m perfectly fine have my bum looked at on a broom. It’s less degrading.” Kingsley gave a roaring laugh and even the two silent Aurors next to them gave a hearty chuckle.

“Well spoken indeed! Well then, let’s begin shall we?” She gave him one of her patented smiles and a nod. Together walked up the steps onto the stage where a gathering of Ministry officials and the Egg sat, shining in all its splendor. Kingsley led the both of them to a podium, where he stood and began to speak to the rapidly quieting crowd.

“Witches and Wizards,” his voice boomed under the power of the sonorous spell, “Today has been a day to remember. When we first embarked on this plan to unite the best and brightest that Magic has to offer under the banner of competition, we ever thought that it would

be so splendid. So dangerous. Or so remarkable. What began as a small idea thrown out behind long tedious meetings grew into what is probably the most challenging and rewarding tournament the Wizarding World-"

"Magical World." Ginny corrected him. The Minister and the crowd chuckled as they heard her.

"The Magical World," he amended with a small smile, "has ever seen. It has been a long time coming, but we finally have a winner. Through acts of remarkable magic, outstanding skill and daunting determination I declare one Miss Ginevra Molly Weasley, the winner of the Grand Merlin Maze!"

The vast crowd clapped and cheered, and though no one could see it, she blushed a deep shade of scarlet. Once they were settled down, the Minister continued.

"Ginevra Weasley, as no one can hold the same Order of Merlin, and as you are already a holder of the third class, it is my esteem pleasure to award to you the Order of Merlin Second Class. For outstanding bravery and use of advanced magic under difficult and life threatening situations."

Ginny gaped at him in amazement. This was the first time an Order of Merlin had been handed out since the end of the war. She was getting one just for winning some contest. She didn't feel right about that and squirmed in discomfort. Kingsley seemed to understand his discontent and dropped the sonorous spell.

"Ginny, I know you think it is a bit much, but trust me, you earned it. I don't think you realize that even nine tenths of my Auror department couldn't have survived that maze. Your feat was astounding. Accept the reward."

Ginny frowned a bit and sighed. She ducked her head down and allowed him to place the medal around her neck to the thunderous applause of the crowd.

"I still don't feel right about this," she muttered and was rewarded with a cheeky grin. Kingsley resumed the far speaking spell and continued.

"And now for the final and most esteemed prize. For the first time in sixty years a member of the English Society of Magic will have the opportunity and honor to bond with a Phoenix. We went to great lengths to acquire an unhatched egg. It took us the better part of sixth months, many gifts and a great deal of negotiating on the part of the egg's mother to part with her beloved offspring. Having known Miss. Weasley for the better part of ten years I am proud to say that I can think of no more deserving witch that she, to bond with the legendary bird. And I can think of no higher honor for any magical creature than having the opportunity to form a life long bond of love and friendship with her. Let us begin the hatching."

Everyone grew quiet and Kingsley led and nervous Ginny over to the stand that held the glowing egg. Up close she could see thousands of rivets along the shell that gleamed some something within. The shell itself was a brilliant red and the golden glow from within was breathtaking. She couldn't help but be reminded that the colors of her school house were based on the colors of the Phoenix.

"Pick up the egg Ginny." The Minister told her. She looked at him nervously before reaching out with shaking hands to grasp the rare and precious egg. She hissed and drew back her hands.

"Its hot," she told him with a scowl.

"It needs to be hot or it won't hatch. You have to deal with it. Show the creature that you are willing to endure the pain to be close to it or it won't bond properly. You'll be ok. If there are any burns we can heal them later."

Ginny nodded her understanding, and with gritted teeth, firmly grasped the shell and picked it up. She grunted at the heat and could feel her hands almost start to blister. The hot sand that it was sitting in still held some specks that dug into her skin and burned even more. She had to bite the side of her cheek to keep from crying out. Still, she did not drop it or let go. She endured; as she had when climbing

the Blood Tree. Then again the pain relieving potion she had taken just minutes before was still in effect.

A swarthy skinned man, in black, star speckled robes, strode over to stand in front of her. He spoke in an odd language that Ginny didn't know. Thankfully the Minister could translate for her, and did so.

"He said, 'you endure the pain well, and for that your bond will be stronger. Endure still and we shall hatch the creature.'" Ginny gave a trembling smile through blurry eyes to Kingsley for the translation. Her eyes widened even more when a Phoenix burst into appearance on the man's shoulder. He looked to Ginny and this time spoke in broken English.

"Weasley, Ginny. Kivirana, this is. Mother to the egg you hold. Only Phoenix can hatch Phoenix. Firm stand. Hurt, it will."

Ginny gave a sharp nod, wanting it to be over. She locked her eyes with Kivirana. It was a marvelous bird. The only time she had seen one was back during Dumbledore's funeral almost eight years ago. And that was just briefly. Up close she could see why Phoenixes were so prized, regardless of their amazing powers. Kivirana seemed to read her heart in her eyes and delved down someplace deep in it's search for something only it could know. It took a moment, but finally the bird seemed to consent and gave a sweet trill that lifted up her heart and banished her worries. The Phoenix gave a mighty flap of its wings and hopped over to rest of Ginny's shoulder. Ginny looked on in awe and felt the soft nuzzle of the bird's feathers on her cheek. She beamed a smile and returned the kindness, rubbing her cheek in return. Formalities done, the hatching began.

Kivirana stretched her neck high and began to sing. With the blessed warmth of inspiration, Phoenix Song burst through the air. It was the sweetest, most heart inspiring sound Ginny had ever heard. It lifted her soul up high on winds of love. She swooned and swayed with the gentle melody. Her pain seemed to fade away as her conscious drifted towards dreams of bliss and pleasure. She was startled when a face drifted in front of her eyes. It wasn't a face she expected. She didn't love him did she? She hated him. He did more than break her heart. He tore it asunder and left it to drift in a cold sea. So why, when

a song of love and cherishment sang through her very being, did she see Harry? It shouldn't be him she saw. It should have been Eric. She loved Eric, not Harry. She focused on that and slowly Eric's face drifted into view. Only it wasn't the warm kindness and determination that Harry's face had. Eric's was cold and aloof as if regarding a possession or pet that was misbehaving. It sent chills down her spine.

As if sensing her distress, Kivirana sang higher and prouder, dispelling the dark feeling that fell over her for a moment. Ginny snapped back to reality with a tingle of joy and shivers of rapture ran through her body. She jumped a bit when she felt the Egg move in her hand.

Suddenly a second song joined the first. It was softer and, if possible, even more innocent than Kivirana's. The tones were opposite of Kivirana's, but the timing seemed to mesh perfectly into a sound so pure and profound; it shook everyone in the stadium to their very core. The egg shook more and the glow from the rivets along the shell flared a brilliant gold. Like the rising of dawn over a mountain of galleons. Along the rivets cracks began to appear. The song reached a crescendo and with a final pitch of a pure single tone the egg cracked and shattered.

The song slowly faded away, to leave everyone in the stadium, men, women and children, in tears. Ginny looked down into her palms in awe. A small bird, that could nestle in the palm of a single hand stretched and arced its little head. Its beak opened and closed with soft little snaps of hunger. It was so cute with a little piece of shell dangling on its head. Kivirana trilled a soft note and reached over from Ginny's shoulder to remove the shell from her child.

"You're so...small." was the only thing Ginny could say. Kivirana gave another small trill and Ginny could swear it was a chuckle. Ginny looked at it reproachfully. "Well she is!"

She. Ginny wondered how she knew the Phoenix was a female. There was no way to know, yet she did. The swarthy wizard stepped over to Ginny with some small pieces of fruit and hand them to Ginny.

“Feed it. You must now take the place of its mother. Chew the food for it and then let it eat.” he told her softly. Ginny nodded her understanding and popped the fruit into her mouth and chewed quickly. When it was a small mesh she rested the bird in one hand and with the other took the fruit from her mouth and held it out to the tiny creature. Eagerly the tiny beak nipped away and greedily ate every drop. Ginny continued to do this until all the fruit was gone.

She grew panicked when she felt the tiny form start to heat up and a glow start to form in its tiny eyes.

“What-What’s going on? She’s getting hot.” The man stepped closer to her.

“Hold her. The pain will be great. Let go you shall not. This is the bonding. Burn your skin, the fire will, but ignore it you must. This is the first burning.”

Ginny started to breath rapidly as the heat grew and grew till the tiny form burst into flame. She cried out in pain as the fire lashed and charred her skin. She fell to her knees as her skin blackened from the lethal flame. She didn’t let go though. She wouldn’t dare drop this little love. Finally, after what seemed like minutes, the fire subsided and a pile of ash rested in her palm. It was so light she feared that the wind would blow the ash away, and she would lose the little magical beauty. Her fears were unfounded however when the weight grew and the ash molded and reformed. The tiny head of the new born poked up from the ash, its eyes automatically seeking hers.

The moment seemed to suspend in time.

She could feel her heart move in a single slow beat. The blood moving in slow grace through her body. She could feel the faster heart of the magical bird as well, it pounded in her hand. The beat of their hearts changed. With precision, the beats started to move together. The tiny fast fluttering of the new Phoenix seemed to mesh with her single heart beat. It was like a percussion beat of the Phoenix Song. She could almost make out the pitch and swell of the harmony with the beats of the hearts in that single second of time.



Deep in her soul she could now feel another presence. A new life, giving warmth to her dying one. 'Dying one' was an apt description as, next to the new, hers was a pale shriveled unsightly thing. With grace and magic as old as the beginning of time the new soul seemed to stroke hers to greater heights. She felt the wrinkles smooth out and the taint she had felt since her first Hogwarts year was dusted away like an old cobweb. The magical bird had healed her very soul of the horrors that had been wrought upon in.

Time returned to normal and Ginny burst with tears of love and amazement. They were one. They were bonded. She held in her hand the very ideology of love and faith. A new life, a cherished friend. A daughter, a mother, all rolled into one. The small thing gave off a note of tenderness, and Ginny couldn't help but to lean over and give her a soft kiss.

"We're one now aren't we little one?" she said in a whispered. She felt Kivirana bob her head.

"Name her, now, you must." The dark skinned man next to her said, with his heavy accent. She looked up at him in startlement. She had forgotten that anyone else was around her, it was so quiet. He was looking at the small creature with the same awe that she had felt.

"Name her well, for rarely is a bond formed at birth. It is the highest honor that Kivirana allowed you to so early. Normally you would wait years for the bonding. You have a noble heart with much love to give. Name her well and name her now."

Ginny bit her lip and looked at the tiny form in her hand that was staring at her in adoration and love. It was like a new born goddess. A new dawn, a first dawn, even if she did not have her feathers yet. She then knew what to name her.

"You're name will be Aurora. After the Goddess of the Dawn." Kivirana stretched her neck once more towards the sky and sang as the name was given. Ginny's heart swelled once more and looked to her shoulder at Aurora's mother. She could feel that Kivirana approved of the name and Ginny was happy and proud that she had chosen wisely.

"It is a good name. Dawn signifies a new day, as she is a new born. That you have named her after the goddess and symbol of all new days is a great honor. You are a rare one Weasley, Ginny." the unknown man held out his arm and Kivirana hopped back over and climbed onto his shoulder.

"Ummm, Kivirana?" Ginny wasn't sure if it was polite to address another Phoenix directly or not. It didn't seem to be as her attention turned to Ginny.

"My hands really hurt and I can't move them. Do you think you could..." she trailed off, afraid to ask any further. Kivirana seemed to look at her with compassion and understanding and spoke to her child in song musical chirps. Aurora understood and in her palm cried its healing tears. Ginny gasped at the coolness as the tiny tear hit her dead and blackened skin. A tingling in her palm began as two more drops touched her. She could feel new skin begin to grow under the dead. The dead and charred skin cracked and turned to dusty ash that blew away on the gentle breeze.

"Amazing." Ginny whispered. "Thank you Aurora." Aurora gave a tiny, almost silent chirp of pride. Ginny gave a heart felt laugh and felt a tear of her own course down her cheek.

"Yes, you did great! You are great! You're perfect Aurora and I love you." Aurora sang to Ginny with her own feelings of love and she couldn't help but bring her healed hands up and give her another kiss. Then she realized something. She looked to the man who had helped her through the bonding in amazement.

"I understood her. I knew what she meant!" The man laughed and nodded.

"Always, you will. Part of the bonding it is. To know what one thinks, wants and needs."

"Wow, this is like a dream. I don't know what to say. Thank you." The man smiled at her and Kivirana gave another trill.

"Don't thank us. Kivirana is honored that her child is in your hands. She knows you are worthy of her daughter. Now we must go, we have things to do." Ginny gave a nod and with a last farewell to her daughter Kivirana burst into flames and vanished along with the mysterious man.

The crowd began to cheer and clap again, everyone was amazed and moved at the public bonding and birth of a new Phoenix. Kingsley stepped over to Ginny and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Congratulations Ginny. Donkor rarely gives praise."

"Who was he?" she asked him, while pulling Aurora close to her body and cradling her tiny form against her chest.

"He is a wizard from Egypt. He is like Dumbledore to the area there. A powerful and wise man. You should be honored that he thought so highly of you."

"I am," Ginny assured him, "I most assuredly am."

"Good. Everything is done then. For the sake of young Aurora's young sensitivities you should take her straight home and get her someplace warm. She will need lots of warmth until she gets her feathers."

"Umm, ok. Umm, Kingsley?"

"Yes?"

"How do I take care of a Phoenix? I don't know the first thing about them really." he gave a sly smile and touched the side of his nose.

"Then I suggest you ask an old friend. It will be the perfect opportunity to catch up old times and mend whatever fractures there are between the two of you."

Ginny looked at him in confusion, not understanding. He leaned over and whispered into her ear.

“Harry knows all about them and how to care for one. After all he has one himself.” Ginny drew back and gasped.

“Harry? No! I won’t talk to him. I’ll do the research on my own.” Kingsley shrugged and grinned back at her.

“It’s up to you Ginny, but I don’t know of any books that talk about raising a new born Phoenix, only about their powers and how to get a feather from them for wands. Aurora’s health is up to you, now.”

“But-but.”

“Go home, Ginny. Get her someplace warm and talk to Harry. Don’t be childish and put a new life at risk. Phoenixes can die after all.”

Ginny gave a mutinous glare at the ex-Auror. “That’s blackmail.”

“Well, I am the Minister for Magic after all. Now get going, we can’t hold the press back for much longer.”

Ginny gave a huff, and with her new friend and love she walked off the platform into the waiting and eager embrace of her family to head home to the Burrow.

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After Ginny had returned to the excited embrace of her family everyone had broken off to go their separate ways. Each of them had headed home to get ready for the feast later that evening at the Burrow. Though no one had spoken it in front of Ginny, they were all excited and anxious for Harry to show up. It had been a long time and everyone had questions for the long, lost, missing Weasley.

Hermione and Ron arrived at their cottage in the country practically bouncing off the walls in their excitement. They paid the babysitter and once the young girl was gone Hermione turned to Ron immediately.

“Ron, that was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen! Have you ever heard or seen anything so beautiful? And Aurora! She was so cute! I want a Phoenix Ron, get me a Phoenix!”

Ron sputtered and looked at his wife slack jawed.

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that. I’ll go down to the shop tomorrow and grab a spare egg that they have.” Hermione had to laugh and fell into his warm and loving embrace. She settled her head next to his heart and was drowned by the soothing deep beat.

“I love you Ron Weasley.”

“I love you to ‘Mione.” She shivered at the way he said her name. No matter how often he used that nickname she would always get a warm fuzzy feeling from his deep voice.

“We should get ready,” she said, still in the comfort of his arms, “I want to be there when Harry shows up.”

“Yeah,” he pulled away from her and ran a hand through his hair and reached down to pick up Rose who was tugging at his robe.

“What are we going to say to him? It’s been so long. It’s like a lifetime almost. So much has changed.”

“I know.” Hermione said and tickled her daughter causing her to laugh and squirm in Ron’s arms. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“You can begin by saying hello.” A voice called out from the doorway. Ron and Hermione whipped around and gasped.

“Harry!” they said in unison. Harry stood in the doorway in different robes. The ones he had worn in the Maze had been torn and bloodied. His new robes were deep black with a silver crest on the right breast. He reached up and adjusted his glasses and smiled fondly at his two old friends.

“Hi Ron. Hello, Hermione. It’s been a long time.” he spoke in a soft and nervous voice. They could both tell that he was afraid and as

nervous as they suddenly were. His sudden appearance caused all thought to fly from their minds. Little rose grew quiet and looked from her mum and dad towards the strange in their doorway. She knew something was wrong and that she shouldn't say anything.

The three stared at each other. A lifetime of memories playing through their minds. A chocolate frog on the Hogwarts express, a bushy haired girl opening the door to watch a silly fake spell. A troll getting knocked out its own club. The chessboard. Endless hours in the common room. The chamber of secrets. Dementors and a Patronus. The Tri-Wizard Tournament. Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore's funeral. Malfoy Manner...The Final Battle and the last Good Bye.

Hermione took one faltering step and then another. In a rush of emotion she ran towards Harry. A dam of tears breaking as she gave a wild cry of relief, anguish and unbridled emotion.

"Harry!" she flew into her arm, bowling him back into the door and clung to him in a hug as if it was the last one she would ever be able to give him. "Oh, Harry, thank god." she sobbed into his chest, reverting to her muggle vocabulary in her emotion.

Harry's arms closed around his old friend. Someone who had saved his life more times than he could count. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek on the top of her head, letting her cry out every memory they shared together.

"Hermione..." he whispered just for her, letting her know in that simple word all the unbound love he had for her and how much he missed her. She cried harder and laughed at the same time. A paradox of emotions threatened to rip her apart. They both felt Ron's strong arms wrap around the both of them. Harry opened his eyes to see his best friend crying as well, but silently. Smiling and hugging the two of them as well. The trio was together again. The defeaters of Voldemort. The greatest friendship ever shared was reunited at last.

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It took some time and the three of them just stood together, holding each other. The simple silence and closeness repairing and

reaffirming the love that they felt for each other. Years of being apart seemed to be sewn back together by the hug and bond that they each shared. They had fought together, bled together and almost died together countless times. In that shared moment, each of them knew that no matter the distance or time, they would always be the best of friends.

Finally they separated and Hermione dabbed at her eyes and smoothed down her robes. She was a frightful mess, but to Harry and Ron, she had never looked more beautiful. Ron and Harry clasped hands in a strong grip.

"It's good to have you back mate." Ron said proudly. Harry smiled and gave a nod.

"It's good to be back. I missed you both more than I can say."

"And we missed you Harry. You...You should have come back sooner. You've missed a lot." Harry hung his head a bit and gave a big sigh.

"I know." That's all he said. It wasn't the time of excuses and explanations.

"Harry." Hermione spoke up and they looked at each other. "Before we begin talking about everything and catching up I have to do one thing and I want to apologize for it right now."

Harry looked at her in confusion, but silently waited. SLAP! Harry staggered back from the force of Hermione's hand. Spots danced in front of his eyes and his face felt like it had been flogged by a whip.

"How dare you!" she hissed in fury. Ron stood behind her and settled his hands calmly on her shoulders, but made no move to stop her. "After everything we had been through. After everything we shared and did together. You left without a word to us. Not even a note. We had to hear some second hand excuse and explanation from Ginny! How could you do that to us! If you wanted to leave then you had to leave. But not a word. You never even had the kindness to send us a letter during all this time to let us know that you were ever alive!"

Her chest was heaving in her anger, and without Ron's strong arms holding her down she probably would have attacked him again. Harry rubbed his jaw, but didn't look angry at all. The fact that he calmly took everything like he deserved just fueled her anger even more.

"I know, Hermione. I know what I did was unforgivable, but how do you say good bye to the people you love the most? I couldn't face the two of you. I know I had to leave, to heal, to get help, to begin a real life, but if I had tried to say good-bye to the both of you, I wouldn't have been able to. The words wouldn't have come and I never would've been able to leave. All I can say is I'm sorry, and I'm all better now."

Hermione's anger seemed to drain away and she looked at him fondly. Tenderly she reached up and stroked his cheek.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked softly. Harry shook his head and took her hand in his.

"No. I deserved it, and probably deserve and will get more before the week is over. You can hit me as much as you want Hermione. I've a thick stubborn head." Ron and Hermione laughed, but were cut off by a small girl tugging on Hermione's robes.

She looked down to Rose and the girl stretched out her arms. She a smile she kneeled down and picked up her daughter.

"Harry. I want you to meet Rose. She's my daughter." Harry looked at Rose fondly and reached out to tap her nose lightly, causing her to giggle and shy aware into her mother's chest.

"Hi Rose," he said, "I'm Harry. You've grown up since last time I saw you."

"Last time?" Ron frowned. "When did you meet Rose mate?"

"When she was born. I snuck into the hospital and put a teddy bear in her crib."



"You were there?" Hermione asked with wonder. Her eyes alight with Pride. Harry had really been there. She always swore that she felt him close by that day. Harry gave a nod and a cheeky grin.

"Yup! I was at your wedding too. In disguise." Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Who were you?"

"Does this ring a bell?" He coughed a bit and took on an elderly voice with a strange accent. "Well ain't ya just da prettiest lil' ol' bride dis here side o' da' Atlantic' Ye've got a mighty fine lil' rear for a man ta' admire. I reckon' dat der husband O' yours tis one lucky man."

Hermione's jaw dropped even further and she looked stunned and blushed as red as a lobster.

"You were that drunken old lecher that kept grabbing my bum while we danced!"

Harry laughed and gave a slight bow. "That was me."

"What's this about grabbing my wife's bum?" Ron glared and Harry stopped laughing immediately and looked a little sheepish.

"Err, right. Let's just skip that and say that I was there at the wedding and when Rose was born and leave it at that."

"I agree. I don't need to hear about anyone grabbing 'Mione's bum, but me."

"Let's sit down and talk a bit. Harry, do you want something to drink?" Hermione asked and set Rose down on the ground.

"Pumpkin juice, if you have any, please."

"We always have plenty. Rose, sweetheart, why don't you go play with your toys. Momma will check up on you in a bit." Rose giggled and ran off, her little legs kicking up the hem of her little flowered dress as she ran off to her room. The three of them made their way to

the table and Hermione summoned three glasses and the pitcher of pumpkin juice.

“So where have you been Harry?” Ron asked once they were settled into the comfy chairs. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Well that’s a long story and I’d prefer to tell it at the Burrow later. There’s a lot to tell and it could take awhile. Short story is that I traveled the world. I had Lily with me to keep me company and I learned a lot.”

“Lily!” Hermione jumped a bit. “Lily O’Dowell! I remember now! She was the little girl at the table the night you left. You took her with you?”

Harry grinned and nodded. “I did. I adopted her about a year later. Her parents died in the war and Severus adopted her and looked after her for awhile. After he died, it was the least I could do to make sure she grew up safe and educated. I...I never thought being a parent could be so rewarding, but I don’t know what I would have done without Lily there the entire time. I love her to death.”

Hermione gave a smile and slapped her leg. “Finally. That damn spell on the girl was driving me to insanity. I knew that I recognized her from some place, but that stupid Fidelus charm you put on her was making my classes a living hell, Harry.”

“Well I couldn’t have people knowing who she was or remembering her leaving with me. I still have a lot of enemies, maybe even more now and people might have hurt her if I wasn’t around and they knew who she was. I can drop the pretenses now that I’m back in the open. Not too many people would probably target her, knowing I was moments away in Hogsmead. By the way, what was with the detentions Hermione? Lily chewed my ear off about you and the charm. Wasn’t that a little harsh? I got no peace for a week, dozens of letters and a floo call every night.”

“Well, she was lying to a professor and I couldn’t very well punish you now could I?”

Ron laughed and smiled at his wife. "Well he's back so now you can punish him if you need to."

"Oooh." Harry said with a waggle to his brows. "Thank you Ron. Go ahead Hermione. Punish this bad boy." Hermione blushed to the roots of her hairs.

"Oi!" exclaimed Ron. "I didn't mean that!" Everyone laughed and settled into a cozy conversation for the next hour before they decided it was time to go.

The Burrow, and Ginny, waited.

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A/N - I really worked hard on the bonding and I hoped everyone liked it. Wanted to make it deep and meaningful, as well as the Trio's reunion.

Next Chapter - The Meeting at the Burrow!!

I HATE! HATE! HATE! fanfics word processor. I can't tell you how deep my loathing for this stupid, poorly coded, POS, is.

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## Chapter 11

### The Burrow

“George! Bill! Stop that at once.” Molly said in a firm tone; addressing her two wayward sons who were busy hovering a couple of knives, and having a mock sword fight. The two men in questions grinned at each other, but relented, putting the knives back in a half broken, musty drawer.

Most of the Burrow was like that. Old wood, cracked and worn. Some pieces hanging just so, giving the place that well lived in, but poor look. In all honesty, anyone in the family could have fixed up the old cottage in a heart beat. All it needed was a little concentration and a few waves of a wand. However, anyone in the family that thought such things quickly dismissed them. It was all part of the charm the home had. Each wall and step full of memories. Every broken board a testament to the years spent playing and fighting with each other. Thus, the Burrow was rich in ways most could never understand.

Molly gave her two sons another scathing glare as they walked back outside, and then ran a critical eye over the kitchen. As usual, little bits of homely magic danced around the place. A wooden ladle stirred a sauce pan. A hovering little light bobbed over the stove, signaling that the roast was done. Molly attended to that first. She put on some gloves and quickly pulled the dripping piece of meat from its hot confines and placed it on a platter. She never used hovering charms for acts such as that. In some vague, age old fashion, she felt it could ruin the meat, or that she might accidently drop it. Better safe than sorry when it came to her boys and food. Her husband included. She remembered one time when she made the mistake of hovering a primed stuffed chicken one day when she was in a rush.

Fred, bless his soul, had bumped into her and it sent the chicken spinning around, into the rainy mud outside. Molly found out that day that no matter the power and authority she had over the men, if they lacked a good meal, action would be taken. It was the one time she was forced out of her kitchen as the Weasley clan went into rebellion. Red hair had flown everywhere as they plunged into the cup boards and frig to satisfy their addiction. She watched in horror, being totally

ignored in her protests and yelling, as the seven men in question concocted what had to be the most repulsive dinner she had ever laid eyes on.

They seemed to think it divine for some reason, and Ginny, and herself, just sat at the table, staring askance at the bubbling, almost living, mass of...something, in front of them. Oh, no. She ALWAYS carried the food by hand now. Never, would the Weasley clan perform such acts of atrocity again, while she still breathed.

It was just starting to turn dusk at the home. The sun was on its last stretch, inching closer to the horizon and the sky was tinted a light orange among the dark blue. If one looked hard, enough they could barely make out the moon just beginning to peek between the clouds. A vague hazy shape, ready to pounce on the night. A long table was set up outside, filled to the brim with food, laughter and friends. Molly paused in her work to stare at the gathering from the kitchen window. It was a celebratory affair. Friends rarely seen or heard from had come out from the wood work. Ginny had won the Grand Merlin Maze, and as such, had vaulted her name in the chronicles of history's most powerful witches.

Molly took a peek at the woman in question. Ginny was sitting at the table with a small gathering around her. In her arms nestled the slumbering form of Aurora, the new born Phoenix. The motley crew of friends and family were chatting away at the red headed witch. Everyone animated at such a momentous occasion. Ginny had a wide and contented smile on her freckled face. Every now and then she would tuck a stray strand of her hair behind her ear and reply to some unknown question. Occasionally, Molly saw her daughter's eyes darting toward the long stretch of road, however, and a furtive expression cross her lovely features. She was keeping an eye out for Harry.

Harry. Molly took a shuddering breath and couldn't help, but to take a quick look towards the road as well. When she first saw his face on the monitors at the stadium, her heart had leapt in joy and astonishment. She had all but given up on seeing him again. Her long lost son. The boy who had been practically adopted into her family. The boy was now a man. A strong, confident, wizard. She knew she

wouldn't be able to hold herself back from smothering him with one of her patented hugs. She didn't know how he would take it, but it was a risk she would be forced to take. She only hoped that in the years that had past he would still find comfort in the embrace of those that cared for him. And cared they did. Every single person at that table. Even Kingsley had fled the Ministry to attend the dinner.

She chuckled to herself and shook away her musings and marched outside, roast in hand. People were laughing and talking as she approached the table and set down the wide, thick, piece of beef.

"Molly dear," Arthur drew her attention, "I think we have enough food for the royal palace. Take a seat and spend some time with us." Molly smiled at her husband and tucked in her dress and slide in, next to him.

"That's everything dears," she addressed the eager looks of gathering, "Tuck in." With those words chaos ensued. Hands began plucking left and right. Heaps of potatoes vanished. A whole chicken was torn apart and that roast she had just set down was neatly nicked away to eager plates and starving stomachs.

Ginny set Aurora in her lap and dug into her food. Her belly was practically clawing its way out to get to the food. She was famished from the ordeal earlier, and took great satisfaction from piling an amount on her plate that would baffle and concern even Ron. A little chirp drew her attention and she looked down to see her precious little Aurora looking up at her with doleful eyes. Ginny reached for a strawberry and fed the small Phoenix the fruit with a fond smile.

Already she could begin to see the ruffle of red feathers begin to grow over the skin. For now however, the air would probably set a chill into the young bird, so she was wrapped firmly in some blankets and a heating charm. She returned to her food, but noticed, from the corner of her eye, that her mother staring at her. Irritably she snapped her gave up and sighed in exasperation.

"What is it mum?"

Molly just looked away as if nothing was wrong and picked at bit at her food. "Nothing, dear. Just thinking a bit is all."

"What about?" she asked, but felt she already knew the answer.

"About you and Harry." Yup. She knew it. Ginny gave her mother a sulky scowl as her face heated up.

"There is no, me and Harry, mum. There hasn't been for close to eight years. Honestly, I've moved on, why can't everyone else?"

"Oh come off it Gin," George broke in shaking a chicken leg obscenely at her, "The man's been in hiding for years and he suddenly shows up very publicly, which you know he hates. You weren't up in the box when they took away everyone's magical items. He went berserk. Don't have to be Hermione to figure out that he still holds a flame for you."

Ginny looked away and felt her face flush even more. "That was...sweet of him. But that's neither here nor there. He's nothing more than a distant friend now."

"Well, you'd best get ready sister-O'-mine. Because that distant friend is walking down the road."

Everyone turned in their seats to look down the dusty old dirt road. Indeed, Ron and Hermione had arrived and were escorting one Harry Potter. People started to stand up and wave. Molly, the most fervent of all. Ginny felt a panic well up inside her and she looked around the table frantically. There it was. The bottle of fire whiskey. She quickly snatched it up and poured herself a generous amount. With courage befitting a Gryffindor, she threw it back in one gulp. She sputtered and gasped from the strong liquor, and her eyes watered as a warm feeling floated through her; hopefully hiding the sudden flush to her pale skin.

Her eyes snapped back to the legendary trio as they walked off the path into the grass towards the gathering of people. She took the time to study her old love closely. In the Maze he was dirty and scraped up. It was a gloomy place and she didn't get a good chance to look at him

before the start. Now that she could see him better, her heart started to flutter a bit.

My, he was handsome. The boyishness of his youth had smoothed out into a rather, roguish, look. He was clean as a baby and in a deep black robe. His hair was cut short and spiked slightly, removing that messy look he always had. His jaw had strengthened and his shoulders were broader. He was still skinny, but not as malnourished as she remembered. He had a slight, healthy tan that spoke of living in a place that was warm and sunny. She could envy that a bit as English weather was always a bit damp and chill from the ocean and the channel. His eyes though, were the wonder. Even from here she could see that spark, that nervous twinkle, amid the sea of furious emerald green. My, but a girl could get lost in those things.

She lost sight of him as Molly bounded in her pudgy glory, and enveloped him in a hug.

“Oh, Harry,” the matron said, “it’s so good to see you!” she drew back and held him at arms length, taking in his look.

“You’re still skinny as a rail. I knew you wouldn’t eat right. Well you’re back now and we can but some meat on those bones, beginning today.” His smile for her was all enveloping.

“It’s good to see you too, Mrs. Weasley. I’ve missed you,” he said in a soft, pleasant voice.

Molly blushed and pulled him into another hug; mostly to hide her face that was threatening tears. Soon people were clapping him on the back and shaking his hand. All giving him their warmest welcomes.

“Well come on, sit down, sit down.” Molly practically forced him into a seat with Ron and Hermione on either side. Ginny specifically avoided looking at him as he settled down across from her. Damn her meddlesome mother.

“Hey Gin,” her brother said, eagerly pulling some food onto his plate, “Congratulations again.”



"Thanks, Ron," she mumbled softly, still refusing to look up at Harry.

"Hi, Ginny," the soft, emotional, voice of Harry drifted to her ears. She tensed and looked up. Those powerful eyes were focused totally on her, as if nothing else mattered in the world. Her heart fluttered again and her breath hitched in her chest.

"Hello, Harry," She did her best to form her tone into a cool, but polite tone. She thought she saw a flicker of emotion play over his face, but it was gone so quickly that she couldn't be sure, "Welcome back to the Burrow."

He smiled a bit and took a sip of pumpkin juice that Hermione had poured for him. "Thanks. The place looks just like I remember. A lot of good times here."

"Mmm Hmmm," she muttered nonchalantly, "That's nice," and went back to her food. Harry suppressed a sigh and turned towards his two friends, who were watching the interaction with keen interest. His feelings of annoyance at their presumptions returned quickly. As if the past seven years had never happened. He could already see Hermione's mind working to formulate some plan that would put Ginny into his arms. While he felt that would be about the greatest thing in the world, he doubted that, even she, would be able to mend the rift between the two.

"So, Harry," George began, "You've been off becoming the next Dumbledore for seven years. Tell us about it, mate. Where'd ya go? Wha'd ya do?"

Most of the table at their end went quiet and turned to look at the dark haired man. Harry shifted a bit and ran his hand through his hair. He hesitated before speaking, putting his past into the right words.

"Well, like I told Ron and Hermione, the best answer would be; I traveled around the world. Went to different countries. Studied magic under some wizards and groups. Worked here and there. Just a bunch of random stuff really." he smiled a bit and looked around, hoping that the answer would satisfy their curiosity. He was wrong.

"Really now, Harry," Hermione looked at him with the scowl he remembered so fondly, "You can do better than that. Give us some details. From what we saw in the Maze, you did more than just, 'study'," she brought her fingers up to quote the word, "With some random wizards. Tell us more."

Harry almost laughed when he saw he looked around absently, as if looking for her school bag to take notes. She was as constant as the stars to him. The best of a friend.

"Ok, Ok. Well. How to begin." he paused and thought it over some more.

"I guess the beginning was after Voldemort died." He was pleased that no one flinched at the name or showed any reaction besides a shadowing of the eyes from memories of those dark, dark days.

"My whole life was building up to that point. In the first years of school I didn't think about the future much. There was just school and magic and the problems that went on there. The Philosopher's Stone, The Chamber of Secrets, stuff like that. There Voldemort came back and I honestly had devoted almost all of my thoughts to surviving."

He paused and pulled out a flask of some off amber liquid and poured a glass. After wetting his lips he continued.

"You all have to agree that the odds were against me. The chances of me living long were slim. I kind of felt the same way. I really didn't give any thoughts at all to what would happen after, and 'if', I defeated him." he took another drink, cringing a bit and blinking his eyes rapidly.

"So there I was; Voldemort was dead, I had won and for the first time I had a future in front of me. Only I didn't know how to start a future. What did I know about making a life, or living beyond the war? Nothing. Not a thing. I wandered the halls thinking, 'What do I do now?'. Then it came to me. Start over." His eyes flicked to Ginny to see her watching him intently. When their eyes met, she quickly

looked back down to something in her lap, but Harry couldn't see what it was.

"I had to get away. I had to distance myself from everything about the war. I know you all might not understand, but I needed new memories, a change. I needed to..." he paused again and bit his lip before nodding. "See something else besides a country rebuilding itself. So I left."

He looked down a bit and everyone say, once more, the insecure boy that at first showed up in their lives at the Hogwarts express, fourteen years ago.

"I hope you call all forgive me. I just needed to get away. I think I would have died or broken down, if I'd stayed."

Molly dabbed at her eyes and gave a brisk nod. "Of course we understand, Harry. Nothing to forgive. You gave everyone so much, it was time for you to do something for yourself." She sent a particular glare towards her daughter, but Ginny avoided the look.

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley. That means a lot to me."

"We all feel the same way Harry," Hermione said, taking his hand and stroking the top, "You don't need to explain why you left. We all know."

"That's right, Mate." Ron also enforced the sudden feeling of closeness, "You did what you had to, now your back. Won't say we didn't wish for this years ago, but that's neither here nor there. You're back. Now get on with the story."

Everyone laughed, but Ginny just sat silently, petting the sleep Aurora, while mulling over the words. She knew that everyone made sense and she wanted to just forget the hurt and throw her arms around him, but she couldn't. She shook away the beginnings of the thought when Harry continued his story.

“The first thing I did was open up a new account under a different name and transferred most of my money to there. I didn’t want reporters following me or getting any hint to what I was doing, so I made up a new persona. John O’Dowell. I spent some time in the Leaky cauldron and bought some things and sent out some owls, while I thought about what I’d do next. I had to find some anchor for my life, something to give it some joy and meaning, but most of all, fun. Then it struck me. What was the best thing about being a wizard? The Magic.”

“I realized that in the years I forgot how fun and awesome magic was. I wanted to find that feeling again. I suddenly found myself wanting to know everything about it. How it worked, what could be done with it. I didn’t want to just memorize spells, I wanted to create new ones and see things that most wizards hadn’t”

“Oh, No!” Ron exclaimed causing everyone to look at him curiously.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked.

“You’ve channeled Hermione! You’ve become smart!” Harry blinked and Hermione swatted her husband’s arm.

“Ummm, I’m not sure how to take that, Ron.” His first, and best, friend looked over to his wife and glared at her.

“It’s your fault!”

“Pardon?” she said indignantly.

“He was fine the way he was and you go off and infect him! Now I’m going to have to listen to you two go on for hours about Buggerblup’s Theory of Wand Picking!”

Harry started to laugh uproariously, soon followed by everyone else. Hermione gritted her teeth and replied in a rather heated tone.

“That’s Bettelman’s Theory on Wand Movements, you git.” This just caused everyone laugh harder and soon everyone was doubled up laughing at a rather embarrassed, but disgruntled Ron.

"Well, how am I supposed to keep all those different names straight? I hear about a hundred of them a week," he mumbled to himself, stuffing a piece of chicken into his mouth.

"Anyways," Harry continued, once he had regained his composure and wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes, "I figured the first stop would be to place that I new someone from. So I, with a new truck, full of books and supplies I headed off to Bulgaria and met up with Victor Krum."

"Krum can plow himself into a Dragon!" Ginny suddenly entered into the conversation, looking rather put out.

"Don't mind her, Harry. She's just pissy 'cause Krum cost them a chance at the Finals this year. He's still the best around," Ron assured him. Harry grinned at the red headed girl with a certain mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"I've been watching. You're coach is an idiot, Gin."

"You don't have to tell me that. Half of us are trying to find a way out of our contracts before she permanently ruins our careers."

"Don't do that just yet. I've never stopped watching the League and I have a feeling there is a change coming for the Harpies." Ginny narrowed her eyes and picked apart that cryptic little statement.

"What have you heard?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. Just a feeling is all." He grinned again.

"If you know something, Harry Potter, You had better-"

"Look," George interrupted with exasperation, "You two love-birds can talk brooms, and bats, and buttercups, another time. I want to hear Harry's story." Ginny blushed to the roots of her hair and looked away, refusing to comment on the 'love-bird' comment.

“Ok, so I went to Bulgaria and stayed with Krum for a bit. Was a bloody great time. We flied together a lot and he taught me some awesome moves. It was there I picked up some of the best Defense spells I’ve come across. Their Dark Arts Program at Durmstrang isn’t what everyone thinks it is. Yeah they teach the arts, but mostly it’s for recognition. I mean the students there and teachers really ‘know’ what they are talking about and how nasty the stuff could be. It was there I found out that the Dark Arts wasn’t just about Unforgivables and combat spells. Most of it is murky rituals and potions and vicious charms. I’m confident now from all my travels that I know almost as much about the Dark Art’s as Voldemort did.”

“Harry!” Hermione gasped in horror and covered his mouth. “How could you?”

“It’s not like that Hermione. I made a lot of enemies over the years and I’m still target number one for any dark wizard that wants to make a name for him self. I needed to really know what to expect and how to stop the stuff. I’ve never practiced any of the stuff; don’t you remember the book in my workshop?”

She nodded.

“It’s like that. How can I heal or stop something from hurting me or Lily if I don’t know what it is?”

“Well...I guess that’s alright then. As long as you didn’t cast any of that rubbish.”

“Of course not. I’m not that daft. So, anyways. From Bulgaria I went to Russia. I was by myself and Lily most of the time there and a lot of the wizards in that place are kind of lawless. A lot of empty land, so I had to learn the small things about being a wizard pretty quick. How to get food and make a home livable. There are hundreds of little spells that make a home livable. I never appreciated how great a witch you were, Mrs. Weasley until I spent several months there.”

Molly smiled her thanks, but didn’t interrupt.

“And from there, Lily and I headed to Egypt.” His face and voice grew a little grim. “I’m not sure if that was the best place for me to go, or the worst. A lot of good things happened there and some really bad.”

“I remembered that you all went there for vacation once, and that Bill learned everything about curse breaking there. I thought it would’ve been a grand thing to see the Pyramids and the Valley of Sorcerers. Once there I met up with this batty old man. I never found out his real name, as he had forgotten it, so he told me to call him Dimplewad.”

Ginny giggled, and a lot of her animosity was melting away at listening to Harry’s travels. She found herself following the intricate movements of his lips. The way the edges turned just so and how, every now and then, his tongue was peek out to wet his lips. Or how, when he took a drink, they wrapped around the edge of the glass in a sexy manner. The fire whiskey earlier had helped to calm her down a bit. She was a small thing, so such a large glass had done wonders to giving her a small buzz. Harry was still talking though, so she listened.

“I know. I laughed at the name to, but he was a smart bloke. He knew almost as much about magic as Dumbledore. Even if he was a messy, smelly old coot that tried to get me to lure young girls to his place for a night of...frivolity.”

George laughed. “I’d like to meet that man, Harry. Fancy setting up a meeting?”

Harry gave a wink. “Sure. Just so you know, though. He has a rather infuriating habit of talking you into a parting with your wallet. When I met him he was living in some rusty old tin warehouse. When I left he was living in a well to do home, all paid for by me. Never figured out how he talked me into everything. Man could talk a fish into thinking it was a bird.”

“Errr, Maybe not.” Harry smirked at the lonesome twin.

“So from him I learned all about the old magic and curses. Most of the stuff from the ancient times has been replaced by better spells, but there is still some powerful incantations floating around. It was there I

began my knowledge into making magical items. I spend three years there with Dimplewat. He taught me all about charms and potions and how useful they were together.” He took a deep breath and looked around at his eager audience.

“It was there that I learned how to stop the Killing Curse.” As one everyone gasped. Kingsley sat up straight and shook his head in denial.

“Harry, that’s impossible. The killing curse ignores all magical shields. Anyone hit by it dies. The exception being you of course.” Hermione told him.

“You’re right Hermione. There is no shield or counter curse that can block it. But...you can transfigure it.” Everyone started to shout at him, all in various negatives, telling him, in no uncertain terms, how wrong he was. It took several moments for the noise to die down, but Hermione started right in on him.

“Harry, that definitely impossible. Merton’s Law states that Magic, being from the Empheryal Plane of Possibilities, can only affection the Physical Plane of Reality, as possibilities exist separate from each other until brought into reality by magic. You can’t transfigure or alter what technically, doesn’t exist.”

“Sure you can.”

“What?”

“You can alter the possibility that the possibility in question is another possibility.”

Hermione blinked. “.....Oh!”

“Oi! I’m getting a head ache here. What does all that mean?” Ron asked.

“It means Ron,” Hermione answered in an awed voice, “That Harry has broken almost every known fact of transfiguration and magic known to the Magical World.”



“Well, Harry tends to do that. Been doing it all his life. Now what does all this stuff about possibilities mean?”

“You see Ron, when you cast a spell; all the spell does is conjure a possibility. The Killing Curse, for example, brings for the possibility that whoever it touches is dead. The spell is just a maybe. A what-if. Its effect only takes place when it hits someone. Until then it's just magic, that's why no shield can stop it. It isn't a force like a stunner or a bone breaking curse that already exists when it leaves the wand. The Killing curse is raw magic from the Empheryal Plane. So it isn't really physical until it touches something physical.”

“I still don't understand.”

“Just trust me Ron. Harry has done...the impossible.”

“Thanks Hermione. I'd glad you understood.” Harry took out a heavy medallion from around his neck.

“This is what I bound the spell into. It creates a transfiguration field around me. Anytime one of the Unforgivables comes close to me, this pendant turns them into a healing or cheering charm. So instead of hurting me, the spells help me.”

“Harry,” Kingsley leaned forward with a great deal of interest, “Could you make more of those for the Ministry? If we could outfit the entire Auror department with those, we would never have to worry about another Voldemort again. Auror deaths would drop down to practically nothing.”

Harry shook his head with a grimace.

“I'm not sure the Ministry could afford it, Minister. I've only made two of them and each one cost me around 100,000 galleons a piece. You'd bankrupt the Government for them.”

Kingsley winced. “That is a bit steep for us at the moment Harry. We still have people die all the time. We don't have any Voldemorts, but we still have a lot of evil wizards doing their best to take his place.

Those things would make any attempt at the kind of power Voldemort wielded almost impossible.”

“I know, but I’ve not been able to come up with a way to cut down the costs. It takes almost a year to create just one.”

“I think I’d still be willing to pay for them Harry. I’d like to buy at least twenty of them.”

Harry winced and shook his head. “I’m sorry Kingsley, but I don’t have that kind of time.”

“Harry-”

“I’ll tell you what,” Harry interrupted before he could be begged again, “I’ll sell you the formula for the design. That way you can make as many as you can afford. You can set an entire department on their creation.”

“Deal! Name you’re price Harry. We simply MUST have them.”

“Not a price per say. I just want the first three that you make. I already made two of them. One for me and one for Lily. I want three more for Hermione, Ron and Ginny.”

“Deal. Stop by my office tomorrow and we can finalize it. Errr, you wouldn’t be interested in taking over as head of the Department of Mysteries would you? Lead the campaign so to say?”

Harry gave him a grin. “You sure you want me in the Ministry? I could probably take your spot inside a week.”

Kingsley fumbled for his Minister badge and held it out to Harry imploringly.

“Please! Do so!” Everyone laughed as Harry blanched in horror and fell out of his chair. Once he dusted off his robes and regained his seat he continued on with the story of his adventure.

“Back to the story. I learned almost all I know in Egypt. I visited all the tombs, learned all about curses and how to identify and unravel them, and even learned a lot about dueling. Now I’m no where near Dumbledore’s level. Far from it. But I can hold my own in a fight now.”

“So, like I said, I spent about three years there. From there I went to America. My time there was...interesting we shall say. The Ministry over there, which they call the Wizarding Congress, was both far behind and far ahead of any other country. Some of the magic they use is really intricate and advanced. They have a lot of ways to make their spells work in conjunction with muggle technology. Its pretty astounding some of the things they’ve come up with, but at the same time they have a serious lack of the building blocks of ‘old magic’, as they like to say. The stuff we learn at Hogwarts is like long lost lore to them. Their knowledge of wards, potions, and healing is painfully slim. At the same time their transportation and communication is far above ours. They don’t use floo travel. They use mirrors. They can step into a mirror and come out someplace else. As well as talk to people through them. Its loads better than kneeling down in a fire place and getting soot all over you.”

“Wicked!” George said, only a slight interruption.

“I would have returned after only a few months there, I felt I was ready by that time, but the Congress got in touch with me. Somehow they found out who I was and everything I had been trained in. They offered me a job. An important job.

“What was that Harry?” Hermione asked.

“They wanted me to completely revamp their entire educational system. Work out new curriculum. Fill in the gaps they had with the old magic. So that’s what held me up. I figured that Dumbledore would have been proud of me. Coming up with a way for thousands of kids to get a better magical education. I couldn’t turn it down. I was never able to repay him for all that he did for me. It was the only thing I could think of to tie up that last knot in my past.”

“Very well said Mr. Potter.” Everyone turned to see Professor McGonagall walking over towards the table that sat the guests.

“Professor McGonagall!” Harry exclaimed excitedly and stood up quickly. She was about to say something else, but Harry took her in his arms and spun her around like a little girl of ten.

“Mr. Pottter-Harry! Put me down this instant!”

Harry relented, but grin at the flustered looking Headmistress.

“It’s great to see you Professor!” he said fondly, leaning over to give a peck on her cheek. She blushed again, but rewarded him with a cherishing smile as she smoothed down her rumbled robes.

“It’s good to see you too Mr. Potter.”

“Please, call me Harry. We’ve been through too much together for formalities.”

“Very well then, Harry.”

“Thank you. Come, take a seat.”

“Very well, but I can’t stay long. I came to say hello and to give you this.” she held out a letter that Harry took from her.

“It’s from a certain young lady that is most angry with you. She insisted I give this to you and asked me to tell you that you,” she coughed, “owe her a new broom for the distress you put her through.”

“Oh, yeah.” Harry grimaced. “Well I’ll owl her later. A new broom is out of the question though. She got into a stop of trouble over the summer and she isn’t allowed one until next year. Providing her grades are good of course.”

McGonagall raised an eye brow, but there was a notable expression of approval on her face.

“It’s good to see that, although young you are for such a responsibility, you handle it with great poise and just discipline. I am impressed.”

"You wouldn't be so impressed if you saw me try to explain about how a woman's body works when she began...well...you know. I don't know who was more scared. Me or Lily. I told her to look it up." McGonagall pursed her lips, but he could tell she was struggling to stop a smile.

"Oh Harry, you didn't," Hermione said disapprovingly, "That's a very scary time of a young girl. Especially if she didn't have any other women around to let her know what it meant."

"What was I supposed to say? I didn't know what to do anymore than she did. I told her what it meant, but not what to do. I spent an entire day running around making a fool of myself with every female co-worker I could find. They all thought it was hilarious."

Ginny went into a fit of giggles, waking up Aurora, who crooned her sweet song to the table. Harry's head whipped around and he gave Ginny a hard look.

"Ginny, is Aurora in your lap?" She gave him a haughty expression, not liking the way he was looking at her one bit.

"Yes, she is. So what?" Harry pursed his lips and stomped over to her. He looked down into the bundle in her lap and shook his head.

"Ginny, what are you doing to that poor bird?"

"I beg your pardon?!" Harry ignored her and turned to Kingsley.

"Didn't you give her any books on how to take care of Aurora? She's going to cripple the bird if she keeps this up."

"What?" Ginny said worriedly, her anger forgotten in an instant. Kingsley gave him a small smile.

"I'm afraid, Harry, that such knowledge is very rare. Knowing that you were back I decided to let you handle her education in such matters as you yourself have raised a Phoenix since its birth."

"Blimey mate!" Ron said in amazement, "You've got one too?"

Harry ignored him again and looked back to Ginny. "Come on Gin, we've got to get Aurora nursed up. She's already starving and in pain, it's not good."

Ginny's lip trembled as she looked back and forth between her new friend and Harry. "Will-Will she be ok?"

"She'll be fine, but we need to get her taken care of. Don't worry, I'll help you every step of the way." His voice was gentle and he gave her that smile that he used to. The one that made her think that she was someone exceedingly special. She gave a nod and stood up, holding Aurora too her carefully. Harry turned to the concerned group and gave a weak smile.

"Sorry for leaving so soon, but the story was pretty much over anyways."

"Not so fast Mr. Potter." McGonagall halted him.

"Before you go off on your little escapade into bird care I have some things for you."

"What is that Professor?" He asked curiously. She took out several folders and set a sheet of paper on top of them.

"Take these, you will need them. Now on top is you're schedule for the term. The folders are the records of your students-"

"Wait-What-How-" he sputtered, but the decisive headmistress spoke right over him.

"Mrs. Weasley has been doing an admirable job in the Defense Position, but I am looking forward to having you on the staff. The students will benefit greatly from your experience and knowledge."

"No wait just one minute-" he tried to interrupt, but she ignored his protests, acting like she never heard him.

"You will find that the current staff is most agreeable and Mrs. Weasley can bring you up to date with the course and what she has planned. Now I expect you there first thing Monday morning before breakfast. You will need to be in the Great Hall for me to introduce you."

"Professor, I really can't-"

"Hush child. I'm sure you remember your way around the castle, but if you need a guide, to refreshen your memory Mrs. Weasley can once again help you out. It will be an excellent time to catch up I believe. It would probably be easier for you to come Sunday evening, but I understand that you will have business to attend to before you take over your duties at the school. Thank you for taking the job Harry, I've been looking for someone for over a month. Good day everyone." She strode back towards the road to head back to the school.

"Professor!" Harry called out to her, utterly flabbergasted. "I can't do this! I have a business to take care of! I just opened up in Hogsmead! Professor!.....Professor!" she ignored his cries and vanished once she got outside the wards that protected the property. Harry's jaws worked soundlessly and he turned towards his friends.

"Did she just force me to teach at Hogwarts?"

Ron gave a nod and scratched at his beard. "I think so, mate."

Hermione was utterly glowing with excitement and bouncing practically bouncing in her seat. "Oh, Harry, this is great! Minerva's had me teaching since the start of term. I've never had the knack that you do, I just can't get the point across to them."

"Hermione! I can't take the job. I've got other obligations. You've got to tell her that I can't do what she wants me to."

"Nonsense, Harry. You're already almost out of products to sell. Sooner or later you're just going to be sitting around in that shop waiting for the occasional customer to come in. You already said you do most of your work by request. Just hire someone to run the shop and come to Hogwarts where you belong."

“Hermione-”

“Harry!” Ginny interrupted with a pained voice. “Aurora?”

“Oh, right.” he sighed and gave a glare towards his old friends. “This isn’t right. She ambushed me. I’ll talk to you guys about this later. Come on Gin, let’s see to Aurora and get her nice and cozy.”

The two of them headed into the Burrow, the gathering watching them move away.

“Kingsley, that was masterful,” Molly told him once the two were gone, “I never knew you to be so devious.”

“One does, what one can, Molly. I’ve known Ginny for years now, and I remember all too well how she looked whenever we got a hint about Harry. I took the opportunity to set up a situation that would bring them together. I only hope it works.”

“So do I,” she told him softly, “So do I.”

“So what do you think about Harry’s travels?” Ron asked, diverting the attention away from the Ginny/Harry situation.

“He’s done so much,” Hermione spoke up, “The fact that he found a way to transfigure spells is just unreal. He might have created an entirely new branch of magic. I can’t wait to get a chance to talk to him about it.”

“Blimey, Hermione. The bloke just came back, wouldn’t you want to talk to him about something else besides learning new things.” Hermione fixed him with a steely look.

“Outside or the couch?”

“What?”

“Where you want to sleep tonight. Outside or the couch.”



Everyone burst with laughter as Ron stammered out a response.

Arthur had been quiet the entire time. While everyone was having their fun, he was wondering what had happened to Harry in Egypt to make him look so grim and skirt around the edges of his time there.

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Ginny followed a few steps behind Harry into the Burrow. She was clutching Aurora to her chest and was biting her lip. The look on Harry's face had her worried for the baby Phoenix. Now that she took a closer look she could tell that Aurora wasn't Happy and might even be in pain.

"Does your mum have any sweet oil in the house?" Harry asked her once they were inside.

"Huh?"

"Sweet Oil. Does your mum have any?"

"Umm, I don't think so." Why did he want sweet oil?

"Let's go to my place then. I have all the stuff we need."

"What?" Ginny stammered, suddenly, for some reason flustered at the idea of going to Harry's place. "Why don't you bring it here?"

"Because I don't know what else we might need until I inspect Aurora. It's easier to just go there instead of flooing back and forth all the time."

"Oh, well alright then." That made sense. Very well; Harry's place it was.

He took her over to the floo and tossed some in. "422 Markey Street, Hogsmead." He said and the fire tinted green. He held out his hand for her to take. She eyed it with a bit of suspicion, but reluctantly took it. She found that it was sweaty and he was shaking slightly. Together

they stepped into the floo and were whisked away by the network through the magical tunnels.

When they arrived a moment later she was almost dragged to the ground as Harry was thrown out and sprawled on the ground. Ginny couldn't help but giggle like a school girl at the scene. He was in a tangle of black robes as he tried to get up, but his legs kept stepping on the cloth and he would fall back down again.

"Ruddy, floos," he grumbled to himself once he finally got upright. "Forgot how much a pain they were. Got too used to the Mirrors in the states." he slapped his robes a bit, shaking the soot away and smoothed them down. He ran another hand through his hair, looking at her through the corner of his eye.

"I'd appreciate it, if you didn't tell anyone that I still can't use the floo network without landing on my face. It's a bit embarrassing."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't dream of that. My lips are sealed," she replied in a honey sweet voice. Harry snorted and threw her a frown.

"Right. Anyways, bring Aurora over here and set her on the table."

Ginny did as instructed and placed her new friend on a table of light oak finished. In the center was a vase full of blooming lilies. Obviously charmed to bloom all year long as they wouldn't be alive otherwise this time of year. Ginny briefly wondered if the flowers were for his mum or the Lily girl Harry had spoken of.

She peeled away the wool blankets that covered Aurora and frowned a bit. The skin was a bit ashen from the pale grey it was when she hatched. Why was that?

"Harry, her skin is paler than it was. Why does she look this way?"

"It's the wool. It plays hell on a Phoenix. A kind of allergic reaction. The threads are irritating her and getting into her pores. You should use silk for the first couple of days, until her feathers grow in."

"I didn't know that," Ginny said in a small voice, "I didn't mean to hurt you Aurora. I didn't know," she implored to the tiny magical bird.

"She knows, Gin. It's not fatal or anything; it just hurts her is all. Kretcher!" he said into the air. A moment later a small 'pop' signified the arrival of the old, nasty little elf.

"Yes, Master Harry?" he asked in his croaking, scratchy, old voice

"Harry! You still keep that thing around?" she asked, appalled, "What about what did with do Sirius?" Harry looked at her kind of funny.

"You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"He was just really abused. While Ron, Hermione, and I were looking for the other Horcrux, he helped us find the missing one that was stolen. He helped us out a lot during that time. He even organized the House Elves to fight at Hogwarts."

"Oh!" Ginny blinked, slightly stunned from the revelation, "Ron and Hermione don't really talk about that time much. No one knows what happened besides you three. Anytime anyone asked they clam up and get really pale. We guessed that whatever you guys went through, it was pretty bad."

"That's a way to put it I guess. The other way you could say was that we lived in constant fear for almost a year. I try not to think of that time much either. Anyways, Kretcher, could you get us some sweet oil, some silk sheets, and some sand from Sirius's box?"

"As you wish, Master Harry. Kretcher is always happy to help." the small elf said and disappeared down the hall way. Ginny took the opportunity to ask Harry what was going on.

"Harry, why do we need that stuff?"

"Well, the wool has dried out her skin. A Phoenix has a lot of oil in its skin and feathers. Wool will suck then dry in no time. Then the

threads start to aggravate them. We need the oil to ease the pain on her skin, or she still start to get sores; and her skin may even crack and bleed. This could cause her to go into a Burning state much, much earlier than she should and could cripple her growth. The silk is to wrap her in to keep her warm until you get back to your flat. They really like the feel so silk. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she sang to you for hours, just from feeling it against her skin."

"That wouldn't be too bad." Harry chuckled.

"No, it wouldn't be."

"What's the sand for?"

"To sleep in. When you get back home, get a large basin and fill it with the sand. Put a heating charm on it, to keep her warm. Not too hot, or it could cause her to burn again. Little above room temperature is fine. Wrap her in the silk and set her in the sand."

"That doesn't sound too hard."

"Nope. Sleeping arrangements are the easy part. You're probably going to tear your hair out over feeding her however."

She was interrupted by the arrival of Kretcher, with the items requested. He hovered them to the table and set them down, then stood waiting for any other orders.

"Thanks, Kretcher," Harry told him, "Now can you go get a handful of Sirius's cashews and grind them down? Then mix them with some pumpkin juice. Make it kind of thick, but mushy." Kretcher nodded and vanished once more. Ginny looked at Harry curiously.

"Cashews and pumpkin juice?" Harry chuckled and threw her a grin.

"They eat nuts, fruits and berries. She should love pumpkin juice, and they all love cashews. Sirius does anyways."

"Is Sirius you're Phoenix?" Harry nodded.

“Yeah. Dimplewat gave me the egg a month or so before I left Egypt. He’s not really mine, just sort of like a little brother. A constant friend.” Ginny understood that.

“I know what you mean. I’ve only had Aurora for a few hours, but I already feel like I’d die before I’d let her get hurt.”

“It’s part of the bond. Raising one from birth is much different than having one come to you when their grown. It’s much more intimate. Unfortunately it also means the bond can get a bit much, and you could find yourselves mirroring each others moods when you’re too close to one another.” Ginny nodded, seeing how that could happen.

“What do we do now?”

“First,” he waved his wand and a bottle of Ogden’s finest appeared with two large glasses, “Drink a couple of glasses of this.” Ginny frowned at the drink.

“What does getting pissed have to do with taking care of a Phoenix.”

“Well, you’re going to rub that sweet oil all over her. When you do she is going to sing so strongly if you’re not slightly drunk you’d fall into a stupor and just stand there and listen. The fire whiskey will numb the songs effects enough for you to finish the job.”

She still eyes the bottle and looked at him askance. “How do I know this isn’t some childish attempt to get into my knickers?”

She watched as he grew red with suppressed anger.

“Ginny, could you stop this please? Everything I do or say isn’t some vain attempt to get you back or have you fall into my arms.” His voice then grew quiet and full of hurt. “I think you made it very clear in the maze, that whatever you felt for me is long gone.”

She didn’t know why, but suddenly she felt very ashamed of herself. Still, for some reason her pride wouldn’t let her back down.

"You're bloody well right it's long gone," her temper flared, "Four years gone in fact. You know what? I really can't have this conversation now. Give me the bottle."

She snatched it up and without pouring a glass drank half of it down in one go. She knew she would dread drinking that much. Her little body wasn't built to handle large amounts of alcohol. She blinked and gasped from the torrent of fire that slid down her throat. She almost coughed it back up it burned so badly. Finally though, the burning faded and a sweet taste was left in her mouth, and, once again, her body flushed with soothing warmth. She shook away the steam that shot from her ears and glared at Harry defiantly.

"What?" she noticed he was looking at her sadly and wanted to say something. In the end he let the topic drop and handed her over a large vial of the sweet oil.

"Pour this into your hands and start to rub her down. Don't press too hard, but don't feather touch her either. Find the medium." He was talking in a quiet voice, not wanting to meet her eyes.

"Run everywhere except her eyes. Even get her beak and the joints of her wings. Do that until you empty the vial. Try to stay focused; she's going to go wild with...pleasure. Ignore her song and get the work done. By that time Kretcher should have a bowl of the food for her. Feed her all of it. You won't think she will be able to eat it all, but believe me she can and will." He turned and started to walk out of the room.

"Where are you going?" she asked. Merlin, he could still make her feel like an idiot, just from being his noble self.

"Professor McGonagall rail-roaded me into taking that teaching position. I have to send some owls to customers letting them know I won't be taking any orders for the time being. You don't need me to watch you rub down Aurora. I'll be in the other room with silencing charm. Just come in if you need anything." He didn't say anything else and left her alone in the room. She stared at the door he disappeared behind for a moment before looking around the place.

It was the first time she had taken to study where he lived. She found it charming actually. The carpet on the floor was a dark khaki. Not good for stains, but excellent to hide dirt. It was thick and soft. Perfect was digging in toes when walking barefoot. The walls were solid maroon. It would have lent the place a dark environment, but a crystal chandelier sent light throughout the room. With the light oak and the bright furniture and couch it took away the oppressive feel of the dark colors. An outer robe was slung casually over a large loveseat. Next to that was a small stand with a thin book on magic laying open and a lamp that hung over to provide a reading light. A couch, matching the walls, was in the middle of the room with a coffee table in front of it. It was a light oak, like the table she stood next to now, with a couple of magazines and rolls of parchment strewn lazily about.

It was cozy and well lived in. Almost a complete opposite to the stark walls and decorations of Eric's place, or the hasty unused look of her flat. She could just see herself laying on the couch reading a book while petting Aurora; while Harry sat in the seat scribbling out a letter to someone. She shook the image away and looked at the sleeping Phoenix. How she had stayed asleep during the floo ride she had no idea. The bird seemed to wake up and go back to sleep off and on, never picking one state to remain in.

By this time she was well and truly into her buzz from the fire-whiskey. She had to squint a bit to see clearly and pick up the bottle of sweet oil.

"Aurora," she whispered and nudged the Phoenix, "Wake up little one, it's time for a bath."

Her tiny eyes fluttered open and she sang a soft, pleasing, tune to her. Ginny smile and strikes her head. Touching the skin she realized that Harry was right and it was really dry.

"I'm told you'll like this" she said to Aurora as she poured some of the oil into her hand. She rubbed her palms together to spread it out and pressed to Aurora's belly.

"Now, go easy on me when you sing. I don't want you to know me out or something, just let me make you feel better." She could almost see

the confusion of the bird's face. Did it really understand her words, or just the meaning? She made a mental note to ask Harry about that later. She started to rub gently, massaging the oil on her hands into the dry skin of the magical creature.

The song started out softly. A soothing current of pleasure that vibrated through Ginny. By the time Ginny was in need of a second helping of oil, the Phoenix was squirming around in delight.

'It's almost like a real baby,' she absently thought as she pressed into the second round. When she began on the little wings the effect was instantaneous. It was like a fire cracker had been set off in Aurora. The song flashed out and almost took visible form and rocked Ginny back. The bird was in rapture and threatened to take Ginny with it. Harry was right though and the heavy drink allowed her to keep focus, amazingly enough. She continued to rub and fell into a rhythm that helped to block out the song.

She had been around people and in the constant excitement the past hours she hadn't really had time to settle down and think. As she rubbed Aurora she was given that chance and the thoughts she had pushed away began to float to the surface.

Harry was back. Merlin, he was really back. In the Maze she thought she knew how she felt about that. Now she wasn't so sure. She was still angry, but now there was confusion. She held onto hope for over three years; that he would one day return and they would live happily ever after. She kept her body sacred for him for so long that it almost drove her mad. But he never showed up in her door way. One day she realized that she couldn't, 'wouldn't', end up some old maid having never been married or known a man. So she began to date and have relationships and eventually even gave her body away. Amazingly enough it had been to Roger Davies, A man three years her senior. She felt bad afterward, but eventually the shyness went away and she fell into sex with an enthusiasm. She wasn't a tart to throw her self around, by no means, but she didn't make a guy wait months to share her bed.

Her relationships were few, however. She could count on one hand the number of guys she had dated after she gave up on Harry. Not for



lack of trying of course. The buzz around the Wizarding World, and in Witch Weekly, was that she was, and would forever be, 'Harry Potter's girl'. That was another reason she was mad at him. Even in his absence he had enough influence to keep guys away from her. Damn him.

She didn't want to lie to her self and say that the flame had died. Just from her feeling and the fluttering she felt when looking at him, she knew that it hadn't. Still that anger and hurt was there. She was so alone for a long time. During her sixth year at Hogwarts, when the Carrows and reigned with fear and pain, her only salvation was Harry. She remembered lying awake during the nights, crying and sobbing into her pillow, wondering if he was alright and if she would ever feel his lips again. Or have him hold her in his arms and tell her how wonderful she was.

Then, 'The-Day-After, the name that marked the sorrow of England at Harry's disappearance, it was like she had fell into a lake in the middle of winter. He had just left; he hadn't taken her with him.

It was then that she realized why she was so hurt and angry. By saying that he couldn't heal with her around was saying that she reminded him of the war and Voldemort. In some perverse way it was saying that she was tainted to him. That she was unworthy of helping him get through his problems. That is what hurt the most. Love was supposed to be a partnership. A sharing of the pain. She had her own pain as well, why didn't he want to help her with that and share it together?

She knew, from the way Harry looked at her, that he wanted her. Body and soul. The body part of the look made her flush, even now at the thought. She still dreamed and fantasized about him every now and then. Hell, one time with one of her boyfriends she even called out Harry's name in the middle of her peak. That of course ruined the relationship and the prat had spilled the news to the reporters. That of course cemented the 'Harry's Girl' title. That he still loved her (or at least she suspected he did), told her that the chance was there if she just took it.

Could she take that leap though? Could she let go of the anger and hate that had become a part of her for so long. Did she want to? It had become a part of her. It was who she was. Spurned love of the famous Harry Potter.

Plus there was Eric. Oh yes, Eric. She thought she loved him. He was a thrilling man to be around. His comments on her life style caused her no end of anger though. Normally she wouldn't let anyone say those things to her, but she was so lonely for someone who didn't know about her or Harry, or didn't care enough about him, and just wanted to be with her, that she put up with the words and old-fashioned, controlling ideas that he told her.

In the haze of the song Eric's cold face was brought to mind again. It didn't look powerful anymore. It looked cold and controlling. In fact, it looked a little like Tom Riddles face. Just the expression of course.

She finished off the oil and wrapped Aurora in the sheets of silk. The song dimmed down a bit and Ginny noticed that the skin was once again a healthy pink, with little tips of red feathers dotted here and there.

"Oh, Aurora, what should I do?" she asked her tiny friend. Aurora didn't answer of course; she was too lost in the feeling of the massage and the silk to be bothered with such a silly question. Ginny chuckled at the site.

"Well, you're obviously going to be useless for a bit. How about some food?" That seemed to get her attention and her beat started to snap open, waiting for her dinner. In her musing and thoughts, Kretcher had discreetly placed a large bowl of the mixture on the table. It looked like pumpkin pie filling. She took up a pinch in her fingers and dropped it into Aurora's eagerly awaiting mouth. The little tongue snatched it up and the beak shut.

Harry was, once again, correct and the baby bird opened its mouth for some more. Ginny obliged and then spent the next ten minute finishing the bowl off.

At one point she put her hands on her hips and glared at the bird.

“How can you possibly fit all of this into that body? The bowl is bigger than you?” And it was.

Amazingly enough Aurora did finish the entire bowl before settle down for some sleep, the song finally dying away and leaving the room silent. She stroked her head and noticed that it was smooth and oily now. Not dry and peeling. Much better. Now she just had one last thing to do.

Talk to Harry.

They needed to do that. No question about that. They were going to be around each other obviously, for Aurora. They needed to get things out into the open now and not let it stew. Plus she got the feeling he knew about the men that were hired to kill her. She needed to know about that if she was going to protect herself. She would pry it out of him by force if need be. She doubted that he had changed so much that he talked about everything. Nope he probably still bottled everything up.

She also wanted to know more about Lily. She strode over and entered the room Harry was in.

Harry was tense when she walked in. He was just finishing tying a bundle of parchment to an owl's leg. Ever since Hedwig had died he couldn't get close to any other owl. He kept four available to him at all times though and used them often. He only used Sirius when extremely private information needed to be passed on to someone. After all, a Phoenix wasn't a messenger bird.

He looked over to see her standing nervously in the door way. Merlin, but she was beautiful. More so than he had remembered. The year had given her a more mature and womanly look and she had finished filling out in all the right spots. Quidditch had kept her slim and fit and the constant sun had brought out the tantalizing spread of freckles and the upper portions of her cheeks. Her eyes still danced with that certain fire of personality that he had fallen in love with. He had never stopped loving her. He had never dated anyone but her, nor had he

really even kissed anyone but her. When it came to women it was only her, and the nightly dreams he had of her. Yes, it was nightly.

She had made it clear to him that she had given him up for good and had moved on. He had waited too long. Curse him for a fool and a coward. He had lost the only woman for him in the whole world. He was sure of it.

She stepped in and closed the door, glancing around his study in interest before moving over to him.

"How'd it go?" he asked. She settled into a seat across from him. One that Lily often sat in when they talked.

"It worked wonders. You were right about the song. She went crazy from the oil. And the food. Merlin, how could such a tiny thing eat literally her weight in food? It should be impossible." Harry chuckled.

"Get used to it. You're going to have to feed her like that twice a day for almost a week."

"You're not serious!"

"I am. Her weight in food twice a day until she can fly. They grow really fast. She should be up to her full size and weight within a week. After that you can expect a burning day once every nine months." The look on Ginny's face changed and Harry dreaded the next words out of her mouth.

"We need to talk, Harry." Yup. The words he feared. He was never good at talking as Lily liked to point out. She was right though. They needed to. He sighed and gave her a nod.

"I know," he said quietly. They were both silent for a moment and stared into the crackling fire he had going. When she spoke it almost made him jump, he was so tense.

"Why did you come back Harry? Why now?" He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It was time. I missed this place and everyone. I missed you all so much it hurt. I got caught up in Egypt and America though. Things happened that I can't go into detail about until you understand better, but please believe me that I wanted to come back, but I literally couldn't."

"It was a simple choice, Harry. Come back home, or take up a job, that any Hogwarts graduate could have done. They could have easily sent someone here to talk to the Ministry and a team could have been sent over. The Ministry could have done in a year, what you did in three."

God, could he tell her? She was in danger because of him, he had to. Well here goes.

"It wasn't about a job, Ginny. Lives depended of me. I made a mistake and I'm still working to correct it."

She looked at him oddly for a moment. Her brow was scrunched up and her lips were slightly pursed.

"What do you mean?"

"First, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you."

"Harry-"

"I'm serious, Gin. If someone even asked you or hints that they think you might know this, you play dumb. If Ron or Hermione, or even the Minister for Magic himself comes to you; you can't let them know that I even hinted at anything of what I'm about to tell you."

They were silent for many long minutes as they stared at each other.

"Harry," she finally broke the silence, "The last time you talked like this, it was about, the prophecy. Is this about another one?"

"No, nothing like that, just a plot and conspiracy that spans whole continents."

"Is this about those men that tried to kill me?" He nodded. "Then I promise. I won't breathe a word. Now tell me why you waited so long to come back and why now?"

"Kretcher," he addressed the unobtrusive elf sitting in the corner, "Bring us some food and some wine please. We're going to be here awhile."

"At once, Master Harry." he said and vanished again. Ginny wished she had a house elf.

"Ok, where shall I begin? I know, Egypt. I was about two years into my four year term with Dimplewat. He had decided to teach me about the first wizards. The fount of all magic, where the oldest spells from the dawn of civilization had come from and been created."

"Most of the spells from that time had no counters, like the Avada-Kedavra curse. Old Babylonian and Egyptian. The spells and magic from that time were primitive, but powerful and raw. No altering, no variations, they just did or did not do. They were vastly limited in scope, but as Bill can attest to, neigh unbreakable. They only go stronger as time went on."

Kretcher arrived with the food and wine and Harry began his tale.

"He took me to a place. A place of old power. A place in the Valley of the Sorcerers that no one could find a way into."

"The Pyramid of Phyre..."

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A/N - I was made aware that I made a major mistake in how Ginny viewed Lily. Ginny was at the Burrow when they talked a bit about the

girl. Ginny should have known that and I made a mistake in some of her dialogue. It has been fixed. Sorry for confusing some of you.

By the way. It is pronounced Pyramid of 'Phi-ree' (strong 'l' and long 'E')

Again read and review please.

## Chapter 12

### The Pyramid of Phyre

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Kreacher arrived with the food and wine and Harry began his tale.

“He took me to a place. A place of old power. A place in the Valley of the Sorcerers that no one could find a way into. The Pyramid of Phyre...”

He stared off into the distance as if caught in the haze of distant memories. Ginny frowned at the name, it was unfamiliar to her, but sounded a bit ostentatious.

“The Pyramid of Phyre?” she asked. Harry came back from his wanderings and nodded to her.

“Yeah. Before I begin, you need to understand something about the wizards from that time. They were...stupid, to say the least. They had very little imagination. That’s why so many of their spells are weak or have been replaced with better variations. They didn’t have wands back then, so they made due with other things to focus their magic. Talismans, staves, rings, or some other minor magical object. It wasn’t until the introduction of wands, that wizards really began to come into the peak of their powers, and that wasn’t until around 300 A.D.”

“I’m not sure I follow where this is going.” Ginny said in confusion. What did wands and staves have to do with anything? Harry furrowed his brow in an attempt to explain it better.

“Ok, think of it this way. Where does magic come from?”

“From inside of us, of course.” She shrugged. Everyone knew that.

“And what do wands do for us? Why do we need them?”

Her magical schooling kicked in, from her first year at Hogwarts.



"The magical signatures within the wand draw out our own magic, so that it can be shaped and molded into spells. Without something to focus the magic, it's just wild potential resting inside of us." It was an almost text book explanation. Harry nodded in agreement.

"Exactly, now try to imagine something weaker than a wand pulling at your magic for a spell. Something not as focused, or easy to aim as a thin pointed stick. It wouldn't be very effective right?" Ginny shrugged again as if it didn't matter.

"I guess so, but I really don't see what the point is, Harry."

"Don't worry about the point yet, it'll become clearer when I finish. Just keep that thought in your head. Witches and wizards need a focus for their spells to manifest. Now, back to the Pyramid." He paused and took a sip of his wine, Ginny, after a hesitation, followed suit and found it to be a deceitfully tangy red, yet slightly fruity. A nice wine indeed.

"The sands of Egypt hold more lost buildings and pieces of civilization than any other area in the world, save maybe the ocean. The Valley of Sorcerers is a prime example. An underground valley, hidden by the sand with tombs and tombs of dead wizards and temples. The works of thousands held in one area. There is more knowledge and riches there, still unearthed, than the entire Ministry has in all its archives and holdings."

"When we arrived in the Valley, we first met with some curse breakers from Gringotts. There we spent a couple of evenings learning about what types of curses and spells the ancients laid on their belongings. Like I said before, the wizards of that age were unimaginative. Almost all of the curses you'll find there cause misfortune or death. Except for one place."

"It was our third night there and Dimplewat took me through some narrow caverns deep in the valley. It took us almost an hour to find our way through, and by then I'd developed an acute sense of claustrophobia. When we arrived, it was a large and spacious cave, brightly lit with an eerie glow. There must have been a thousand

torches there Ginny. All glowing a pale blue. Similar to how the Goblet of Fire looked in my fourth year.”

“In the center was the Pyramid. It was huge. One of the largest things I’ve ever encountered. And that was just what could be seen. It extended almost as deep underground as it was above. It easily rivaled, if not beat, the Great Pyramid at Giza. There were runes carved into every inch of the stone. Weather beaten and faded, but they still had some power left in them. There we set up camp for the night.”

“Our purpose there, Dimplewat told me, was to study the runes and the wards that were set up around the place. These wards were brilliant, even by today’s standards. They were on a totally different scale from anything else from that time period. Thousands of years ahead of their time. To say the place was...intimidating, doesn’t do it justice. You could literally feel the magic and fear the place inspired. If it wasn’t for some personal wards that Dimplewat taught me, I would have ran out of there in terror, the misdirection spells were so strong.”

Harry paused in his story and got up. Ginny’s eyes followed him as he walked over to a shelf and pulled out a scroll, tied with a black velvet ribbon. It looked dingy and yellowed from age, cracked and worn from being read hundreds of times. Harry walked back and set it beside him, before taking another sip of the delightful wine he had provided. Ginny was still a little tipsy from the fire-whiskey earlier, but gladly poured herself another glass of the fruity, dark red, substance.

“The next morning we began our study,” Harry continued, not bothering to reveal what the scroll was about, “We started with the runes and writing above the stone door that led into the Pyramid. It was closed though, and Dimplewat told me that no one had ever been able to break through and open it. The oddest thing was that the spells and writing were an old form of Avestan; a language not of the area, and that didn’t come into written existence until around 200-300 BC. So what was a Pyramid, which was buried around 1500 BC, doing with writing that was created over a 1000 years later? That was what Dimplewat wanted to know. And that, sadly, was the first of my many mistakes during those weeks.”

He paused and picked up the scroll again. He turned in gingerly in his hands, while studying the memory of when he discovered its secrets.

“It was our fifth night there when I had a break through. Dimplewat was sleeping, having drunk too much that night, and I was going over the writing we had copied down. There are hundreds of different translation spells in existence, but one of the wards of the Pyramid prevented anyone from being able to read what had been written, even if you copy it down, the spells wont work. It was just meaningless scribble to us. By that time I had just begun my experiments with transfiguring magic itself, and decided to try my hand at it. I thought it would be safe to test it on the copies we had made, rather than the Pyramid itself. I was right.”

“I altered the extended wards on the scrolls we had into a form of the Erudious charm. It’s a charm that helps someone learn a secret rather than hide it. What I found out was mystifying. Read this.”

He tossed the scroll to her and she caught it, half afraid it would fall apart under such rough handling. He fears were unfounded when she discovered it was just a stained parchment to protect against weather and wasn’t as old as she thought it was. She opened it carefully and began to read it out loud.

‘Beyond this door, none shall pass. Our folly shall for all time be sealed from covetous eyes. Let any who seek to gain the knowledge here-in find only loss and despair. Our folly shall be yours and yours alone to fix should you pass through that, which great Set himself, sealed from the weak and greedy hands of mortals.’

Ginny looked up in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“We didn’t either,” he told her, “But I found a way past the wards that even the goblins of Gringotts couldn’t do. I was the first to translate what was written over the doors that lead into the Pyramid. The idea was intoxicating to me. To be the first to read something in thousands of years. To do what no one else, even my mentor, had ever done. My ego became...rather large, I wanted to find out more.”

"I take it that was a mistake?" she asked when his voice took on a resigned and grim tone. He nodded in affirmation and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I was always too curious for my own good. Show me something that said, 'do not enter', and naturally I would open the door. That's what I did in a way. I opened the door to misfortune. The writing over the door told me that it wasn't some creature or dangerous magic that was in there, just knowledge. I thought, what harm could ever come from knowing something. I forgot all about my past in my enthusiasm. If knowledge was harmless, then why did they seal it away? Why keep it from people? I ignored all of that in my own greed and thirst."

"Dimplewat was beside himself of course. The old codger seemed to grow new life in those old perverted bones of his. He wanted to bring in others, an entire team, but I talked him out of it. A good thing I did too, since it would have been a grievous mistake later on. So together, we took down the wards on the Pyramid that prevented us from seeing and translating all of the runes and writing. Once we were able to do that, we could finally figure out what the other curses were that prevented us from entering its depths. It took us a good two weeks to map it all out, but we finally succeeded."

"There were about fifty different curses and wards around the place. Ranging from death to delirium, in their effects. Dimplewat told me that he had never seen a place so heavily guarded. But there was a core spell that fed the wards their power, it was that we attacked. Using our knowledge of my new branch of transfiguration we altered it so that it took power from the spells, rather than gave it. After that it was a matter of days until it was safe to enter."

He took a large swallow of his wine and set the glass down on the table in front of him.

"We should have known," he said so softly that she had to strain to hear him, "We should have known that someone would feel us. You don't do something like that without someone taking notice. But I'm getting ahead of myself."

“When we were ready we entered the Pyramid. When Dimplewat opened the door it was like the last breath of a dying man escaped. Old musty air, stagnant and resting for countless years, washed over us. When we entered the torches came to life. How, we didn’t know, but we were grateful for them none the less. It left our wands free for other things besides a lighting spell. We could make out more of the runes and writing on the walls. The passages kept branching and forking all the time and deeper and deeper we traveled.”

“Dimplewat was like a little boy. It was a dream come true for him. The first people to walk the ancient halls and see what no one else alive had ever laid eyes on. He was as stupid as I, in his quest. It took us another two days of exploring the place and writing down all we found until we came to the antechamber. It was a large square room with pictures and writing covering everything, even the ceiling. At the far end was a pair of large bronze doors. In the center rested a scroll. A small, hide bound scroll, of what we later found out to be human skin.”

Ginny shivered at the thought of such a vile thing. Harry got up again and this time moved to a black box that rested on his desk. There was a single, glowing white rune on the top that faded as he tapped his wand. He reached inside and pulled forth another scroll. This time Ginny knew it was old, and was the very scroll that he had spoken of. She leaned away a bit as he walked over to her and held it out for her to take. She really didn’t want to touch someone made from skin, but relented and took it in her tender hands.

“Read it.” he ordered. She gulped and ever so gently unfurled the thing and set her eyes on its writing.

“It’s Gibberish. I don’t-” she jumped when he rapped his wand sharply on her head. Before she could deliver a scathing curse at him she noticed that she could suddenly understand the scroll perfectly. She still gave him a withering glare, but began to read.

‘We have begun our work this day. The Arch-Priest has been granted permission by the Gods to begin research into expanding our powers. We are excited by the prospect. To no longer require a foci to touch the gift within us is a venture worthy of mighty Set himself. We do not

know how long it will take, but the entire Order is involved and slaves from all over are, even now, arriving to begin construction of the new temple. A place for us to work, given, most graciously, by the Pharaoh, may the Gods grant his immortal soul eternal prosperity.'

'It has been several moons and work on the temple is underway. Meanwhile we have been developing a plan to begin our research. The slaves have been troublesome and are consuming much of our resources. We will have to send away for more supplies, or irrigate the surrounding land to provide our own resources. I wish the Pharaoh, may the Gods grant his immortal soul eternal prosperity, would send us administrators to oversee such things, rather than have to deal with it ourselves. We have more important things to worry about than how some low born heathen slaves are fed.'

Ginny quickly skipped past a dozen such passages, all talking about the progress of the temple and some mysterious 'Order'. She began again when she reached a good part.

'Finally, it is done. After ten years the temple is finished. It is the grandest thing we have ever undertaken in our history. We can now truly begin our work. The new Pharaoh, may the Gods spit on his soul for his treachery, almost stopped all our work. The Arch Priest was able to convince him of its importance though and we can continue. Let us hope we have no more interference.

'The final caravan arrived today. We have pooled all the collective knowledge of the God's gift in one place. It took considerable effort to steal away the prized tomes of those Persian dogs and we may yet go to war because of it, but the Arch Priest insisted that we needed them. We lost many brothers during the flight back to safety; we pray that Set will welcome them for their sacrifice.'

'It has been three years since we began work in earnest and we are no closer to finding an answer. The Pharaoh is growing impatient and is demanding answers. We are not sure that we will even be able to give them to him.'

'There is something wrong with the Arch Priest, and we all fear for his health. He locks himself without his room for days on end to consult

with the Gods. We are close to breaking without his guidance. The Pharaoh has sent his guards to over see our work. They are brutal in their administrations. The Gods have a special place reserved for those who kill and insult their priests. We may have to take action soon. The work must continue.

‘We made progress today. After five years of work an incantation was successful. Sadly, it was at the cost of a life. We do not know how it happened, but the Arch Priest’s son died in the attempt. We fear more so for his ailing health now. The loss of Kamho’s sept is a great blow to our efforts. He was the best and brightest of us all. We hope it is not in vain.’

‘The Pharaoh made his move today. His guards arrived in throngs to stop our work and deliver us into the hands of Set. We met them at the steps of the temple. It was bloody, but we defeated the accursed dogs of the Pharaoh. We lost half of the Order to do such, but it was worth it. We understand now how to do it. We discovered the secret in the midst of battle and blood. Several of us are leaving soon to strike back for this atrocity. The Pharaoh will die.’

‘Now that we are free from under his treacherous influence we have begun to research this new found form of the God’s gift. We are attempting to recreate what happened that fateful day many moons ago. The Arch Priest is old now, and growing older still, but we need his guidance and power to complete the process. We hope the Gods grant him enough time to finish the work.’

Ginny then noticed the tell tale sign of a new writer in the next passages, she could only assume the previous one had died.

‘We are becoming worried. This new gift is not what we thought it would be. Some of my fellow Priests have become to change. They stray farther from the path every day. They grow colder and more arrogant. Whispers can be heard in the halls that we could rival the Gods themselves with this new power. I hope my fears are misplaced.’

‘The Arch Pries is dead. How, we do not know. There is now a rift in the Order. Some believe we should stop all work and others believe

we should continue on. I think those that wanted to stop our work killed our leader, but we can not prove it. If we ever find out they did blood will flow for countless moons.'

'The temple has become a dark place. I find it strangely comforting. The work is almost complete, and we have almost figured out how exactly the new power works. I feel the pull towards the darkness the more I venture into the experiments. I can understand how Jemti, and his cursed, blasphemous, blood traitors, found the spine to kill the Arch Priest. Where we would once seek revenge, now we shrug such things off. We are changing.'

'Jemti and his misfits, claim to have found the secret, but will not share it. Blood was spilled this day. Again. The annoying man is claiming now that he is the new Set. As if we need a new God in our Order, when we are on the threshold to becoming Gods ourselves.'

'Something is wrong with me. I killed a fellow member of the Order today. It was marvelous.'

'The secret has been found! Soon. Soon now we shall reach the very heavens and rule over all.'

'Jemti is a great man. The grandest of us all. He wants me to burn this accounting of our work, and the words that he first set down within them. I can not move myself to do so however. It would be a blasphemy.'

'I woke from the normal ritual to find myself and the others, bathing in blood. I am disturbed.'

'We killed all the slaves today. I decided to re-pen this accounting on the skin of a child. New flesh for the birth of a new age.'

'Merciful Set, forgive me! Someone, please help us.'

'What we have unleashed should never have been. If any Gods can hear our prayers, save us from the screams!'



‘There are only a few of us left to stand against Jemti. How we delved so far into these darkest of gifts we don’t know. We have a brief chance to reclaim the light. We must take it.’

‘I am the only one left. The rest gave their lives to stop Jemti. It is odd to walk these bloody halls by myself. I think some of the Council escaped. However, I was able to strip them of their powers though. The secret will be buried with me.’

‘This is the last time I will write on this degrading thing. If anyone reads this, I can only warn you. Do not go through those doors. Do not seek to master what we had uncovered. To use the Gift of the Gods, one will always need a foci. We did not understand that until it was too late. To have such power is a corruption of the foulest kind. To kill and rule without lifting a finger. No one can stand such temptation. I am the last and with my last breath I shall seal the Temple. It is my hopes that no one will ever find their way inside, but I will take precautions against such.

Ginny saw that there was one final bit of writing, but this time it was in old black blood. She shivered in what seemed to be a warm, but chilly air and read on.

‘It has been years since I set my word to this parchment. The doddering old fool of an Arch Priest had never been dead, but playing the role of a follower. I can’t believe I failed to kill him all those years ago. Worse yet, he has sealed me within this temple. My work will go on though. My power is vast. I was a God. One day those that fled will rise once more to continue my legacy. For I am Jemti, Prelate of the Temple of Phyre.’

Ginny stared at the parchment for a long time before raising her eyes to meet Harry’s

“This isn’t a very nice diary.” she stated simply. Harry chuckled a bit wryly.

“We didn’t think so either when we read it.” He reached out and she handed it back to him. He put it back in the box, and after placing the ward over it again he took his seat across from her. They didn’t talk

for a long minute. Each stared at the crackling fire, lost in thoughts. Ginny of what the writing could have meant, and Harry on what had happened years back.

“What happened next?” Ginny finally broke the silence, eagerly delving into this creepy story. Harry downed his next glass of wine in one swallow and poured himself a fourth.

“Dimplewat and I thought ourselves better than those wizards of old. Thought our magic greater. We mistook the words of the diary as some new spell. Possible dark in nature, but we disregarded that in pursuit of knowledge. Instead of heading the warnings, we went through the bronze doors. We had to know you see. The ‘do not enter’ sign.”

Harry sighed and took off his glasses to clean them. When he pushed them back on his eyes, he continued.

“The room beyond was a treasure trove of lost knowledge and artifacts. It held gold, magical devices, simple in nature, but priceless in value. It had books and scrolls in every language known to man back then. It was their entire collection of magic and wealth. Consider the Great Hall of Hogwarts, piled high with gold and treasure as well as the entire library, covered every square foot with scrolls and books. To say we were stunned is an understatement.”

Ginny blinked at him with wide eyes and a gaping jaw. “I guess so,” she said numbly, trying to grasp the idea of such a large area filled with gold.

“You must be the richest wizard in the world now...” she said in wonder, that much wealth could buy every Ministry in Europe. Harry, though, chuckled wryly and shook his head.

“We never got a chance to take it out. Other things happened.”

“Like what?”

“We found something else. We spent an hour or so disabling more wards that surrounded the chamber. Then, when wandering the

chamber, we found a book. It was on a pedestal with wards over it to equal Hogwarts twice over. That of course, was no longer a problem with me. Their spells back then seemed to pull from a spell of power rather than inherent magic, so it was easy to break them down, by taking away that power. Other aspect of the simplicity of the time."

"Could you explain that a bit better?" she asked, "I'm not sure I understand, this talk of power sources."

"It's no matter. I could spent a week delving into magical theory with you and it has no bearing on the story. What matters is we laid hands on the book. I took the book and diary out with me and Dimplewat took about a hundred scrolls and a hefty sack of treasure."

"We were just settling down for a night of study, back in our camp when the attack came," he said quietly, "A group of wizards or witches, we couldn't tell which, came out of the tunnels, trying to stun us. Dimplewat fell almost immediately. It was a long battle. I hadn't been in a fight like that since the Battle of Hogwarts. In the battle the book was torn in two. I had to worry about Dimplewat though, so I took him and went to the only place I could, back into the Pyramid with him and half of the book. There it was a stand off for a couple of days. I warded the door in every way I could imagine, but they were breaking them down almost as fast as I could put them up."

"Dimplewat finally recovered and helped to keep them out and give me some time to rest and sleep."

"Why didn't you just apperate away?"

"We tried, but they had placed a jinx around the area to prevent apperation and even somehow prevented us from making a port-key."

"I didn't think it was possible to ward against a port-key," she stated in amazement. Harry smirked and gave a shrug.

"Me either. I still don't know how they did it, but they did."

"So then what happened?"

“Well, there we were. We guessed that they were after the treasure, but we held the Pyramid tight. There was no way they could get in anytime soon. However we had no supplies. We could make water of course, but you can’t conjure food. For three days we held out. We had to leave though. Dimplewat insisted on taking as much as we could though, if anything, but to keep it out of the hands of whoever was attacking us. So that we did. We went back into the chamber and took what we could. Dimplewat is amazing with shrinking charms and extendable spells. He spelled every single one of our pockets and bags to a hundred times their size.”

“We decided to leave the gold and take as much of the books and scrolls as we could. Well I did, at least. Dimplewat wanted to keep some wealth though. He took another sack of gold and the rest we had to leave.”

“You’re kidding me!” Ginny blurted out, “You guys just left a mountain of gold behind?!”

“What did you expect us to do? Carry it all out? We had to travel someone light and the feather light charms only reduce the weight so much. Gold is heavy. Anything more than that sack and we wouldn’t be able to left a toe to walk away.”

“I guess so, but still...all that gold.” Harry chuckled and nodded.

“I never cared too much for money, since it was my parents, but well...we found all that and worked for it. It was like a punch in the gut having to leave it behind. But come on, your distracting me from the story.”

“Oh, sorry,” she said, abashed.

“So the rest we spent a day going through the vault and taking every scroll and book that looked the most valuable, then we made our stand. We knew they were still outside trying to break down our wards. We couldn’t get past them, especially with all the stuff we had. There was only once option. We had to let them in.”

“We hid in one of the tunnels by the entrance and concealed it with an undetectable charm. Then we dropped the wards. It didn’t take long for them to come in. They were cautious though, but as they passed the tunnel we got a decent look at them. We couldn’t see their faces, but they were all wearing silver robes. Pretty expensive robes too. Eleven of them entered and they left two to guard the door. Once the group was deep inside we came out with a barrage of spells. The two put up a good fight, but we caught them by surprise and it ended kind of quickly.”

“They ransacked our camp and stole everything that we had, we thought it was only fair to find out who they were, so we took one of the men we stunned captive and fled into the tunnels. Once we were far enough away we made an illegal port-key and went back to Dimplewat’s house.”

“Didn’t you go for help?”

“I’m getting to that. He had a few friends that, when told about the Pyramid, went into a fit of convulsions. Let me tell you Gin, never anger old scholars by telling them you hurled spells around priceless artifacts and crumbling old bits of knowledge. It’s frightening. They armed for war, preparing to kill and we went back to the Pyramid just hours after we left. We were too late. Everything was gone.”

“What?!”

“Gone. The entire vault was emptied. Even the dust was gone. The only thing left was a single bar of gold and a note. It said, ‘Many thanks for the gifts, but you have one left to give. Release to us, the torn book, or we shall hound your steps for as long as you live.’ Needless to say we were all a bit put out by the theft of the treasure.”

“Blimey, Harry. How did they cart away the entire vault in just a few hours?”

“We never figured that out, but we guessed that they must have called in help.”

Ginny shook her head and downed her own glass. The idea of being on the cusp of such wealth, only to have it snatched away must have been maddening.

“So who where they? You said you took of them.”

“Well, the first order of business was a good bath and some food. So that’s what we did first. We hadn’t eaten in three days. We were famished. Then later that night we got around to waking our friend up for some answers. He was resistant at first, but after being starved for three days by him and his friends, we had no compunction over using veritiserum.”

“It turns out that Jemti’s little group, the one that got away? Well, they are still around. Not the same guys of course, but they were a council of influential people whose goal was the break into the Pyramid and regain the knowledge held there. They couldn’t do it, but sadly I did. They call themselves the Council of Harcast. There are thirteen of them at the moment, but it changes from time to time. There have been as many as twenty at one point. All of them are accomplished wizards, they don’t let witches in. Every one of them commands a vast amount of wealth and influence in various countries around the world. From China, to the States, to South America. It doesn’t matter where you come from. If you have wealth, influence, power and ambition and can keep you’re mouth shut they will approach you.”

“So this group. This Council of Harcast. They stole the treasure and want you’re half of the book and you won’t give it too them? That’s why they came after me? To get you to give them the book?”

“I’m not sure, but I think so. It’s the only thing I can think of. For a long time they didn’t know who I was until a few weeks ago, then I think they found out. I’ve had a few attempts to breach the wards around this place, but I’m pretty secure here.”

“Harry, what is this book? What is this knowledge they want? The diary never said.”

“What did I say when I started the story?”

"That witches and wizards need a focus for their spells. A wand or something else magical."

"Exactly, and what did the diary say?"

"That they were trying to cast spells without one. You're telling me that they went to all this trouble over a simple thing like wandless magic? That seems a bit much Harry. Casting spells without a wand isn't a world changing thing."

"That isn't what the power is. Remember, every magic user needed a foci for their spells." Ginny furrowed her brow. This was getting confusing.

"Then what was the power?"

"The trick they discovered was using another magical signature for their spells."

Ginny blinked. "What?" Harry leaned forward and stared at her.

"They found a way to use another wizard as the focus for their spells. The power to steal their magic and use it against them. When you cast a stunner you can dodge it since it comes from the caster. But what about it comes from you? What about it you cast the spell directly on yourself. No chance to even see what happens since it happens within your magical core. What about Cruciatus? Or Avada Kedavra?"

Ginny gasped and her eyes flew open. "Holy shit," was all she could say.

"That about sums it up. There are no charms, wards, spells or shield that can stop someone from using this technique against you. You wouldn't need any wands except on inanimate objects. All you need to do is look at anything magical and they can completely control it. Living or mundane. If it has traces of magic, you have total power over it."

“Harry...you...can do this?” she asked, looking at him in fear. Sweet, Merlin what has he done? Thankfully, he shook his head.

“No. Once I discovered what they had created I shut the book. I won’t tap into that kind of power Ginny, not even to stop Voldemort. I can’t let the knowledge get out. They have half of it and who knows what else from the vault. At the moment they are extremely dangerous. No only do they have all that knowledge, they are each very wealthy secretive and powerful. From my battle with them they aren’t too shabby with a wand either.”

“So that’s why you didn’t come back? You were tracking them down and trying to stop them?”

“Yes. Their Leader calls himself Irium. No one knows what his real name is or who he looks like, but I’ve spent the past several years in America tracking down the other members, trying to find out who they are and what they are doing. I’ve been able to find out who seven of them are. That leaves fives, plus this Irium character.”

Ginny looked into the fire and pulled her robes tighter against herself. She had no idea. All this time she thought he was off gallivanting with other women and had forgotten all about her, when he was struggling for years against some shadowy organization. Her lip trembled and she fought back the tears that threatened her.

“I didn’t know that Harry. I thought...I thought...”

“Thought what?” he asked her quietly.

“I thought you forgot about me. About us. I thought you found someone else,” she lowered her head and her hair fell around her face, hiding the swollen redness of her eyes.

“I thought you forgot about your promise under the tree,” she whispered, barely heard over the warm fire. She felt him move towards her and place a hand on her shoulder.

“I never forgot Ginny. Not one night.”



Her head leaned over and rested on his hand. She closed her eyes against the pain and loneliness. They stayed like that a moment. Her head resting on his hand, while his other brush through her long strands.

“Ginny...”

“Hmm?”

“There’s something you should know.” He withdrew his hands and moved around in front of her.

“What’s that?” She was a little apprehensive about the tone of his voice.

“Before I tell you this, please believe me that this is in no way some plot to get you back, but it’s about Eric.”

Her eyes narrowed and she felt herself tense up. Eric, she had forgotten about him during the story. He was her boyfriend. At least she hoped he still was; didn’t she? His cold and calculating face made her think otherwise though.

“What-What about him?” she asked, not really sure she wanted to hear the answer.

“Ginny, Eric is part of the council. He’s one of their newest members.”

She stared at him as if he had misplaced a good portion of his sanity. Eric, part of some influential and evil organization? Ha! That was a laugh. She shook her head.

“No, Harry. Eric isn’t like that. He had be controlling at times, but he doesn’t have the kind of wealth you say you need to be part of them. He’s just in the transportation business.”

“He is Ginny, and he has more wealth than you know. He is the second largest importer and exporter of magical goods in the world. While not as vast as some of the others, the influence he has in the American Economy alone is extreme. He’s one of them Ginny.”

She shook her head and stood up quickly.

“No, you’re wrong. He loves me, he would never hurt me.” She tried to make her voice firm in her conviction, but it seemed hollow to her own ears. That face kept leering at her.

“Ginny, he doesn’t love you. You’re a famous woman. Your father is one of the most influential men in the country. Your brother is a famous Auror. Hermione is a former Unspeakable and a teacher at Hogwarts. George is rich and an excellent customer in the business of exotic goods. Kingsley uses you all for a sounding board with ideas and Ministry policy. Your family is one of the most powerful in England. He got close to you, to get close to them. Kingsley knows this, Ron knows this. He’s been importing magical goods for the creation of Inferni. Tomorrow morning the Ministry is going to raid his home and arrest him.”

Ginny’s jaw worked soundlessly. She felt a piece of her break at each point that he heartlessly delivered to her. She fell to her knees and covered her face in her hands.

“Oh Merlin, Why?” she cried, “Why?”

Harry was beside her in an instant and put an arm around her shoulder.

“I don’t know why Ginny. I’m sorry I told you, but I had to. You had to know the truth.”

“And what is the truth?” she pulled away in a swing of her emotions and violently spat at him, her eyes murderous in their intensity. “That I’m worthless as a woman? That a man only wants to be with me for my fame or my family? That I can’t have someone who wants me just for me, and not for some ulterior motive?”

“That’s the truth, Harry. I’m destined to die alone, or settle for some bastard who doesn’t love me, just to keep a warm bed at night.”

“Ginny,” Harry said in a shocked voice, “That’s not true. You’re not worthless! You don’t have to settle for just anyone and you don’t have to be alone!”

She started to laugh mockingly, but it soon degenerated into sobs and she fell against him once more. “And I suppose, you’re going to come into my life again? My knight in shining armor to save me from being a bitter old maid?”

He was quiet for a moment before he answered.

“If that’s what you want me to do Ginny. I will,” he said softly. She got her brief burst of tears under control and wiped her eyes. God, she was crying so much lately.

“And if I don’t want that Harry? How do I know you won’t leave again when some new emergency comes up?”

“If need be, I’ll make an unbreakable vow never to leave you. I love you Ginny. I won’t sit around for years before telling you this. I came back for you. I’ve thought of nothing, but you.”

She dared to look at him finally. She wanted so much to believe and just to fall into his arms. To have him kiss her senselessly and carry her into the bedroom. Could she do that though? She just found out her boyfriend had plotted her murder, her ex was involved in some continental criminal conspiracy and to top it off he had a twelve year old girl to look after.

“Lily!” she had forgotten about the girl, “What about that girl Lily you spoke of?” Harry blinked at the sudden shift in the conversation.

“Well she’s a handful, but she knows how I feel about you. I told her all about you over the years. To tell the truth, she told me to shut up more than once. You’ll get along with her just fine.”

She looked at her closely and bit her lip. Kiss...Bedroom. Could she? Should she? They stared at each other for a long moment. Harry apprehensively and Ginny thoughtfully. Oh the hell with it, she was a big girl and could make her own mistakes. She flung herself at the

suddenly startled man, claiming his lips with a fervor that surprised even her.

Mmm, he tasted good. She wondered if he felt that good to.

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It was an hour later and she was curled snugly at his side. Her leg draped casually over one of his while her fingers traveled lazily over his stomach. Her head rested on his chest while she mused over the bed-side frolicking they had just participated in. She was a little dissatisfied. If she had hoped he would be some connoisseur in the art of love-making she was disappointed. He was pretty inept. Still, what he lacked in technique, he more than made up for in enthusiasm. The man was practically bursting at the seams with his need. He kept her going for hours. Unreal stamina, absolutely unreal.

“Ginny,” he directed her from her thoughts and she shifted to look up at him with a lazy little grin.

“Yes?”

“What was this?” he asked her. She blinked in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“Was this a ‘Yes, lets get back together’ type of thing, or a ‘let’s just get this out of the way and see what happens from there’ type of thing?”

She frowned at the question and sat up, pulling the sheets up around her chest as she looked at him. He thought she looked incredibly sexy like that. The white against her creamy skin, with the dark red of her hair highlighting her face. Oh yes, extremely sexy. She tucked the stray strand of her ruffled hair behind her ear and thought over what he said.

“Can’t you just enjoy the moment, Harry?” she asked with a scowl. Why did he have to go and ruin the mood like that?

"I really need to know." She sighed and gave him a somewhat amused glance, but he was concerned that she didn't answer straight away.

"Do you always ask that of your lovers? It's kind of depressing."

"I've never been with anyone, but you just now. So that's a no." She blinked.

"Oh." she thought about that for a moment, stunned at the implication.

"Really?" she asked, "You've never slept with anyone before?" He shook his head and she was floored.

The Boy-Who-Lived. Hero extraordinaire. Just had his virginity taken by Ginevra Weasley. Yup, she was good and floored. 'So that's why he was so inept. It was his first time.'

"Please, tell me," his voice was aching with the need to know.

"Well, that depends."

"On what?"

"On what you expect from me. I enjoyed what we just did, and I hope to enjoy it again, but if you think we can just dive into something deep and meaningful it just isn't going to happen."

He stared to open his mouth to protest, but she leaned over and silenced him with a finger.

"I'm not saying that I'm adverse to the idea, and I know you did what you had to do, but it still hurt Harry. I was alone for a long time and it was hard being the cast off girl of the Boy-Who-Lived. I know it may seem pointless and immature to hold onto a grudge like that, but I can't help it. I can't just give you everything right away, Harry. Let's just take it slow. One day at a time. Please? I can't give you more than that."

He studied her for a second, with those intense eyes of his. Finally he nodded, to her relief.

“That sounds perfect actually. I never got to really date before. I’d like to do that. Take you out and have you dress up. Make a fool of myself in public, get you flowers. That sounds nice.”

She grinned at him a little playfully.

“Harry Potter, are you asking me out on a date?” He blushed and tried to look anywhere, but at her. She grabbed his chin and pulled his face towards hers. He reluctantly nodded, blushing furiously. How he could totally go wild in bed, yet blush at asking her out baffled her, but she found it oddly cute.

“Well then, I accept. It’s a first date though, so you better make it good. I’m a famous witch you know, so I have to be impressed.” Harry laughed and beamed at her.

“Ok then, how about next week Friday? Sound good to you?” She thought about it for a moment and gave a nod.

“That could work.” Then she noticed that his eyes were roaming over her body, which was still covered by the white satin sheet of his bedspread. A mischievous little gleam came to her eyes as she thought about their conversation. She let the bedspread slip a bit, revealing one pale breast for his eyes to feast on. She felt a bit giddy as she saw him lick his lips, his eyes glued to the curvaceous flesh of her chest. She liked him looking at her like that. It made her feel like a desirable woman.

Slowly she drew away the sheet that covered her body and grinned a little wickedly as his breath hitched in his throat.

“So that was your first time?” He gave a quick, stuttering nod. Not even trying to speak in his parched voice, suddenly dry. She felt her heart pump at the thought of her being able to teach him how to please her. It wasn’t a known fact, but many women loved the idea of introducing a man to the joys of sex. Oh, was she going to work him over.

Slowly she draped her leg over his and lowered herself so that she was resting on his knee. Her hands ran up his thighs and rested on his stomach and she ground herself briefly against his leg.

“Ah!” she gasped and locked eyes with his. “So you really don’t know what to do?” She leaned over and pressed her chest against his, her arms slide up to entice her hands with his.

“I think I have the general idea.” he managed to croak out. He breathing was heavy with desire as she felt her hot, flushed skin pressed against his.

“But, do you ‘know’ what to do, Harry Potter?” she breathed into his ear, punctuating her meaning with a light lick and a deft nick of her teeth against the vein on his neck. She was rewarded with another shuddering indrawn breath. She felt him gulp and buried her fierce grin in the curve of his collarbone.

“I’m willing to learn.” He said in his hoarse voice. She trailed some kisses up his neck and across his jaw before leaning back and looking into his eyes.

“Then lay back. Don’t speak. And do as I say.”

He could only nod as class came into session.

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It was early morning and the hall was silent. The only sound being the faint ticking of the heavy antique clock that sat against the wall.

Tick, Tock. Tick, Tock.

The fireplace, dead and cold saw a faint fluttering of soot from its hearth. Still the clock droned on.

Tick, Tock. Tick, Tock.

Outside, through the gates they came. Swiftly and silently. Dozens of them in their dark black robes. Faces set and eyes darting around, taking in every fluttering leaf and every still shadow in the lingering light of the sunrise. In the air brooms dived down and swept over the tall expanse of the manor house. Circling like hawks with wands ready to strike down anything they saw.

The silence of the hall was shattered as the door was blown inward and the figures rushed through. The living room the cold hearth grew warmer and the soot that sat in the cold coals was flung violently outward as robes after robes came through. They moved quickly through the house. The groups branching off to each room. Every door flung open and a ready curse on every lip. Feet pounded up the stairs to the second and third floors. The sounds of banging could be heard as more doors were battered away. Still no sound of spell fire could be heard.

After several minutes the search calmed down and the figures moved into a more cautious search pattern. Outside one of them raised their wand and sent a flare into the air. A moment later a man walked through the door, followed by a short skinny woman with bright glasses, carrying a note pad and a ready quill. One of the black robed figures moved towards the new comer and gave a nod in greeting.

“No one is here sir;” he said briskly, “The place is abandoned.”

Ron Weasley, Senior Auror of the third division brew out a frustrating sigh and looked around the place. It was a stark and unfriendly place. His silent searches of it the past week did nothing to dull the naked atmosphere the O’Soule Manner held.

“Continue searching,” he ordered, “I want every crack and hole in the wall examined. Every document and scribbling of parchment confiscated. Check everything for curses, even the food and drink. Check for detection spells, in case we are being monitored. It looks like he knew we were coming.”

“Begging your pardon sir, but how? Do we have a leak?”



“Maybe, maybe not. He could just have keen instincts. He to work, no time to waste.” The man nodded and left to relay the orders. Ron turned towards the woman at his side.

“Make a note about the possible leak. Go and confer with everyone on their findings. Make sure they document anything strange at all. And keep an eye out for heavy areas of dust. Have anyone that finds some take samples.”

“Right away sir,” the woman replied and shuffled off to begin the report. Ron watched her for a moment, before walking through the hallway towards the den. The sliding door was open and a man with curly blond hair was moving slowly over the book shelves, casting various spells at he went. Ron nodded in approval and moved inside. He went straight towards the desk.

“Is the desk safe?” he asked the blond.

“Yeah. I haven’t searched it yet though.” the man answered distractedly. Ron took out his wand and tapped the drawers open. They were all empty. Even the quills and ink had been taken. Ron wanted to curse someone for this screw up. Eric had somehow gotten wind of the raid and had evacuated.

He knelt down to the ground and peeked under the desk. He grinned as he saw the little catch. He never knew a criminal that didn’t have a secret compartment in their desk. He crawled under the sturdy oak hollow to get a better look.

In the living room the young woman who had walked in with Ron was making her notes. She was alone and was writing down everything she had just been told.

‘Tick, Tock. Tick, Tock.’ The clock sounded.

She began to walk out.

Tick, Tock. Tick.....

The manner house erupted in a ball of brilliant fire.

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A/N - Yeah, too bad. I like cliff hangers.

No, while there will be sex scenes, don't expect something smutty. I hate that crap in stories. Use you're imagination for you're hand massages, not my typing. Ugh. \*shivers\*

That's about it. No big A/Ns this chapter. hope you enjoyed it.

## Chapter 13

### Little Girls, Little Birds, Little Legs

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Ginny stepped through the floo at The Burrow. She was on shift and nervous, virtually coming out of her skin with anxiety, and a false smile plastered on her face. She wanted to bring Aurora, but Harry told her to just let the Phoenix rest and eat before subjecting her to lots of travel. Besides, she needed to speak with her mother and the bird would just distract her and everyone else. The smell of fresh bacon and eggs was in the air and drew the red head towards the ever busy kitchen.

“Mum?” she called out, when she didn’t immediately see the portly matron of the Weasley clan. A moment later a head peaked out from the storage room and smiled at the young woman.

“Ginny, dear! You’re just in time for a nip of breakfast! Set the table would you? It’s almost done.”

She chuckled and went about the small chore. No matter what, when one of her children stopped by the house they were always put to work. As she spent a few moments placing down the plates and glasses she mused over her time with Harry the night before. She decided to just push her grief to the back of her mind and let go for once. It was like a huge burden had been lifted off her shoulders. That was, until this morning when what she did really came into focus. She was nervous and scared and needed to talk to someone.

Second thoughts and worries kept intruding on her and she knew only her mum could give her the sort of guidance she needed right now. She took a seat and waited patiently for her mum. She didn’t have to wait long as she came bustling out of the kitchen a few pans heavy, and promptly filled their plates, and one for Arthur, with some eggs, bacon, and a couple muffins.

After pouring them some pumpkin juice Molly took a seat next to her daughter and looked at her slyly from the corner of her eye. She knew that look on any woman's face.

"I see you sorted things out with Harry yesterday." she opened up the conversation. Ginny blushed to the roots of her hair and gapped at her mother.

"Mum!"

"Oh, don't 'Mum' me, Ginny Weasley. I know that look. Seen it on too many young women over the years. Your cousin Serena stopped by a few months back looking just like you do right now. Happy, but nervous. So speak up! Give me the gossip."

Ginny sighed and took a nibble of her bacon while formulating her thoughts.

"I'm not sure getting back together with Harry is such a good idea. I think I made a big mistake yesterday."

"Oh?" Molly always felt it was best to just let a girl speak about such things before giving any advice. That is if any was needed, which it usually wasn't.

"We talked a lot and I found out why he was away for so long. I can't really stay mad at him about that, but yet I can't seem to get past it. I thought if I just ignored it and went straight to the making up part it would make everything easier. But I think it only made it worse."

"I'm not sure I follow, dear."

"Well, you know how Harry was before he left. He always took any sort of relationship, friend or otherwise very seriously. He hasn't changed much from then. I think he is going to expect more from me now than I can give him. Than I want to give him."

"I take it things went pretty far last night then."

“Mum,” Ginny didn’t know how to put this in an easy way, “He was a virgin.”

Molly beamed a pleasant smile and looked out the window.

“I knew he was a good boy.”

“Mum...”

“I’m just saying, dear. You really should have waited until you were married.”

“Mum!”

“Ok, ok. I won’t say anymore on that subject.” Ginny rather doubted that.

“What am I going to do now? I saw the look on his face. It scares me. I haven’t had anyone look at me like that since...well, since he did back when we were in school. It was thrilling back then, but now...I’m not so sure.”

Molly leaned back and pursed her lips. Her eyes roamed the only daughter for a few moments, accessing the degree of panic the woman had in her before giving the appropriate response.

“Grow up, Ginny.” Her daughter blinked at her in surprise. When no words of rebuttal were forthcoming she continued.

“You’re twenty-three now. You’re not a child. You’ve been in relationships with men before. You sit here complaining every Christmas that you’re all alone. That no man will date you for who you are and that your fame and your body is the only thing that can attract a guy. Then what happens? Harry comes along, who loves you for you and nothing else, and here you are ready to run back here for another Christmas of crying. You may not have realized it, but you compare everyone you meet to him. I’m sorry dear, but if you keep doing that every one of them is going to fall far short of the mark.”

"I know you sweetheart. I sat at your bed side when you cried over him. I sat at your bed side, when you cried over the others. As far as Arthur and I are concerned, Harry is the only man good enough for our little girl. So grow up Ginny. Uncertainty is part of every relationship. Grab onto him and if he tries to get away, wrap a leash on him so tight that he won't make it two steps before you yank him back." She leaned towards Ginny and gave her the famous 'Mother Glare'.

"Harry is a once in a life time opportunity, Ginevra Weasley. You won't find anyone else like him, dear. Don't throw it away."

Ginny stared at her mother in mixture of astonishment and disbelief. She'd never talked to her like that before. She wasn't sure what to make of it.

"It's not really about that, Mum. It's about-"

"Rubbish. You've been in this pattern for so long you're afraid to change it."

"I've been with Eric for-"

"Don't mention that man to me, Ginny Weasley. I told you how I felt about him many times. Plus, there is the fact that you're still dating him, yet spent the night with Harry. Don't give me that excuse."

Ginny really couldn't argue with that. In fact she couldn't argue at all. Her mother ran rough shod over her every time she opened her mouth. Forgoing another curt rebuttal, Ginny sat quietly and picked at her breakfast while dissecting her Mother's advice. Did she really like the life she led? Was she more afraid of changing than she was of Harry running away or asking too much of her? Maybe she was. Maybe she was just being a silly little girl that needed to grow up.

She leaned over and wrapped Molly in a hug.

"Thanks Mum," she whispered, "You always know what to say."

Molly gave a chuckle and patted her daughter on the back.

"I know dear. It comes with the job." They both laughed together and were still laughing when Arthur entered the room in his bath robe.

"Well, what's got my two favorite women in such a stitch this morning?" he smiled that foolish smile of his as she took his place at the table.

"Nothing, luv," Molly told him, giving him 'that' look, "Just a bit of girl talk."

"I see, I see. Far be it for me to butt my nose in the affairs of a woman. But just out of curiosity. How was your night with Harry?"

"Dad!"

"Arthur!"

He laughed and took a swig of his pumpkin juice. They were just about to lay into him when the Weasley family cloak started to chime a deep tone and they all froze. Molly's lips trembled as she slowly turned in fear towards the cloak. Ron's hand had moved towards a word that sent her heart into a tight grip of terror.

"Arthur!" Molly stood up and brought a shaking hand to her chest. "My Baby!"

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Hermione sat at her desk and stared at the dark haired young girl in front of her. To think that this little bundle of trouble was Harry's adopted daughter was somehow...appropriate with the trouble she was already getting into.

"Well before we begin, what should I call you? Lily O'Dowell or Lily Potter?" The girl had the tact to blush a bit at the question.

“Papa says I should stay O’Dowell to avoid attention, but I don’t mind if you call me Potter.” She was playing the part of innocent very well, Hermione thought.

“If Harry wants you to stay O’Dowell, then that’s what we’ll do. Now onto business. What, in Merlin’s name, would ever possess you to flood the potion laboratory?”

Lily shifted her feet and looked away, further delving into the part of misunderstood child.

“It was an accident, Professor Granger. Honestly! I didn’t know the potion would bubble over and expand like that.”

“Well things like that tend to happen when you fail to follow directions. You are aware, however, that the brewing of potions rated class C and above is restricted, and can only be performed in the class room, or with another professor overseeing your work. So again. What possessed you to so flagrantly disregard the rules? You could have blown yourself up.”

Lily didn’t say and just shrugged, showing a bit of mulish attitude.

“I’m not sure how things are done in America, Miss. O’Dowell, but in Hogwarts when a Professor asks you a question, you are expected to answer.”

“I wanted the potion for a friend!” she blurted out, “She gets an awful case of the pimples and asked me to make her a potion to get rid of them.”

Hermione gave the girl a hard stare and shook her head in exasperation.

“Nobel intentions aside, I’m afraid I have no choice but to deduct Gryffindor twenty points and you have a night’s detention.”

“What? That’s unfair! Nothing bad happened. All you had to do was vanish it away! Nothing was damaged!”



“That, Mrs. O'Dowell, is beside the point. You put yourself and others in danger from your little stunt. Worse, it was over a case of mild acne. If you're going to take risks with yourself and the school rules, make sure it's for better judgment than the vanity of a twelve year old girl. Understood?”

“What about you?” Lily blurted out.

“What about me? And I suggest you watch you're tone young lady.”

“You didn't get expelled when you brewed Polyjuice potion in you're second year. And that's a Ministry restricted item. You could have poisoned whoever drank it if you did it wrong.” Lily folded her arms and stared at the strict Professor. Hermione didn't say anything for the longest time, but just continued to stare Lily down until the girl muttered something under her breath and looked away.

“First, Miss O'Dowell; The reasons for the brewing of that particular potions were more extreme than pimples. Second; I researched the potion very carefully for weeks ahead of time and checked my sources against six others, to make sure there were no variations in the recipe. Third; in the case of a poorly created Polyjuice potion the worst that could happen when drinking it is a severe case of stomach cramps and head aches. It is not lethal or inflammatory as yours was.” Hermione then rose up in her chair and leaned forward on her hands.

“And last; if you ever, seek to use your father's little adventures as an excuse to put yourself and other students in danger, or to show me such disrespect ever again, you won't have a weekend free for a month. Am I clear?”

“Yeah, you're clear.” Lily muttered her face a perfect example of a disgruntled teen.

“Would you care to rephrase that?”

Lily coughed and regained the posture and façade of the innocent and misguided student, "I understand, Professor. I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you."

"Well, an act your sudden submissiveness may be, if you can keep up that act perhaps we can avoid such meetings in the future. You may go. You're detention will be Monday night with the new DADA professor that will be arriving."

Lily looked at her in confusion for a moment.

"Aren't you the DADA Professor, erm...Professor?"

"No. I'm normally the Transfiguration Professor. I was just assuming the duties of the position until we could find someone suitable. That person has been found and I will be taking over Transfiguration again."

Lily's face fell.

"But that's my favorite subject."

"Are you saying you don't enjoy my teaching methods?"

"Not especially, Professor." Hermione almost cracked a smile at the bluntness of the girl. She was a boiling cauldron of attitude.

"Good, then you'll be delighted to know that I've been very easy on the students since I wasn't going to be teaching the subject the entire term. I am much more demanding in Transfiguration. Anything else?"

"Who's the new Professor?"

"You'll find out Monday morning. He is widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on Defense Against the Dark Arts. Now get back to the common room. I know you have a two foot essay due for Charms tomorrow."

Hermione gave Lily a patronizing little smile as the girl stamped her foot and snatched up her bag to storm out of the room.

It wasn't long after Lily left that Hermione got the floo call from the Ministry. Minutes later she was out of Hogwarts as fast as her feet could carry her, and once past the wards, apparated away.

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Lily stomped into the Gryffindor common room. With a disgusted look she threw her bag on the ground and plopped down on the couch next to her friend. The same friend that she had just gotten in trouble for.

"I take it things went kind of bad?" Juliana said meekly. Lily threw her a scowl that spoke volumes and the girl retreated a bit, her pimple problem still marking her normally fair skin.

"I hate her! She's a foul uptight toad! I had half a mind to hex her with big buck teeth."

"Who's that?" asked Mark, one of the boys in her year who sat down on the ground in front of them.

"Professor Weasley," Lily replied, "She took away twenty points and gave me a night's detention."

"Really?" he told her, "Wow, you got off easy. The last time she got a hold of someone like that they were milking snakes for a week."

Lily didn't reply, but just pulled out her wand and tapped it against her knee, shooting sparks in the air. Mark wisely backed off and held his hands out before him.

"Sorry Lils, you're right about the uptight part though. She hasn't been too bad in DADA though. I like her much better than when she taught Transfiguration."

"Well, don't get used to it, she told me she's going back to teaching Transfiguration tomorrow."

“WHAT?!” Half the common room shouted at once. Lily flinched and looked around in confusion, not understanding what the problem was. A seventh year hurried over, soon followed by everyone who was down there working on various things. The tall girl was fidgeting with her hands as she addressed Lily.

“Did you say Professor Weasley is taking over Transfiguration again? Tomorrow?” Lily nodded.

“How do you know?” an older boy she didn’t know asked her, his voice dripping with fear.

“She told me herself.”

“Bloody Hell!”

Hell was right, as it suddenly broke loose. People dove towards their bags and pulled out their Transfiguration texts. People who were working on other pieces of homework put it away and frantically pulled out whatever essays they had done for Transfiguration and started to scratch out lines and begin rewording. One of the other seventh year girls fainted dead away. Lily could only watch as the entire Gryffindor House degenerated into chaos. They suddenly looked like they were preparing for their N.E.W.T.s and had to take them tomorrow. Lily turned back to her friends to see that they too had pulled out their homework and were looking valiantly for their quills and ink.

“What did I say? You lot look like you’re marching to your execution.” Juliana was the one who explained.

“You didn’t know Professor Weasley when she taught Trans’. She’s a total nightmare in that subject. She’s ten times harder in Trans than she is in DADA. Think old McGonagall, but worse. She drives first years like their O.W.L’s are only a day away and if you’re already done with your O.W.L’s she acts like it’s the N.E.W.T.’s. If you hate her for DADA, you’ll end up wanting her dead after a month in Trans’.”

“Quick!” They turned as the seventh year girl, who had addressed Lily, drew everyone’s attention. “Sammerson, head to the library and get

the word out there. Jeffrey, head down to the pitch and let the team know they need to cut practice and get to work. You, whatever your name is, you're friends with Ravenclaw find one of the older students and let them know as well. If you see anyone from Slytherin and Hufflepuff let them know too. We can't let the other houses get blindsided by this."

"This is an emergency folks, get to it! Go, go, go!" she shooed at everyone and the people she pointed out ran from the room to their orders. Lily only shook her head in amusement.

"Lily," Matt drew her attention, "You better redo your Transfiguration homework. She really is a nightmare with grading."

"I'll be fine. It's good enough. She won't be that bad on her first day back."

"Suit yourself. Don't say we didn't warn you though."

Lily relaxed back into the couch and watched as everyone dove into their Trans' work with an amazing amount of intensity. They still couldn't keep that one seventh year from fainting again when they told her it wasn't a nightmare. Lily took a glance at her bag. Well, she guessed it couldn't hurt to maybe go over her essay one more time. Charms could wait.

Within minutes the entire Library was silent and had their Transfiguration homework out. Minutes after that a flood of the other houses poured in for the same. Twenty minutes past that time the halls were clear of students. Each dreading Hermione's return. The castle was quiet as the fear permeated the air. No one gave a thought as to who would be covering DADA.

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Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, entered the Ministry of Magic to gaping stares and stunned faces. All work and talk seemed to stop as he walked through the grand hall and past the great statue. He noted happily that it was changed and all the people of the magical world

stood equal in its graceful sculpting. It was a welcome change since he last saw it.

In his eyes, the legislation passed that allowed the Centaurs, Goblins, and House Elves the rights they deserved, was the greatest thing to come out of the war. It was the start to what, Harry hoped, was a bright new age for magic. He was uncomfortable under the stares and whispers though. He'd been able to avoid all that for seven years. Being thrust back into it was like a bucket of cold water being thrown in his face.

This new type of war with the Council of Harcast was a war of wealth and influence, where Voldemort's had been through fear and death. He would need to use his fame and name to do what needed to be done and stall whatever their plans were. It was obvious that they were finally shaking the dust off their name and moving for the first time in over a thousand years. To what purpose he didn't know, but he doubted England and the other countries would benefit from it.

He made his way quickly towards the Minister's office, pausing briefly to shake hands with some official or another and give nods of greeting to shy or eager waves. A little ground work to reassert himself would be useful with the rumors. He entered the Minister's outer office and approached a young lady that had her nose buried in a stack of paperwork. He stood there for a moment, but when she didn't address him he coughed silently.

"Yes?" she asked without looking up.

"I'm here to see the Minister," he told her.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes." She took out a notebook and opened it to today's date.

"Name?"

"Harry Potter." Her head jerked up quickly to see a rather irritated Harry looking down at her pensively.

“Oh...” she stared at him for a few seconds, her eyes flicking up towards his scare.

“I’m so sorry Mr. Potter. Yes, of course he will see you. Go right on in. He’s expecting you.”

“Thank you, and if I may, I know you and the Minister are both very busy people, but perhaps, in the need to keep a good face on the office, you could actually look at someone who comes in and treat them like their time is important too.”

“Y-Yes, Mr. Potter. I’m so sorry. I’ll do that.” she stammered out, blushing an embarrassing shade of red when he chastised her. He gave her a soft smile to lessen the blow and turned away towards the office door. He could feel her eyes on him as he walked away.

When he walked in he found the Minister in conference with a slightly sour looking man. The man was gesturing wildly with one of his hands while the other was waving a folder in Kingsley’s face. They both stop whatever it was they were talking about and turned towards Harry. Kingsley looked relieved to see him and quickly summoned a chair.

“Harry, thank god you’re here. I just sent someone out to find you.”

“No need to rush things Kingsley,” Harry said, “I stopped by to finalize the deal for my recipe.”

“Oh yes, that. Hand over the contract. I’ll sign it right now.”

Harry looked at him oddly, but did as requested. When the Minister signed the paper Harry pulled out a thick book and placed it on Kingsley’s desk.

“That’s a copy of all my notes on the creation of the pendants. The method is in the back. The rest just describes everything in detail. Well, that’s it. I have to close up shop and head to Hogwarts now.” He got up to leave, but Kingsley stopped him.

“Harry, wait. We have a situation that you should know about.” Harry turned back to him with a questioning look and waited.

“We moved on the information you provided me with at the start of the summer and raided Eric O’Soule’s home this morning. There was an explosion.” Harry felt a chill creep into his bones at the news. He walked back over to the chair and sat down.

“What happened?”

“First, I’m sure you remember Pius Thicknese.” Harry nodded and reached over to shake hands. He wouldn’t hold the man’s actions during the war against him. He knew how hard Imperius was to fight, and that was when he knew he was under the spell. Considering that Harry had used his fame to allow the Malfoy family to walk free after the war left him no room to be so hypocritical in regards to the coup performed by the man.

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise, Mr. Potter, likewise.”

“Now what happened Kingsley?” Harry was itching to find out the details.

“Well, this morning we sent thirty members of MLE to the house using standard raiding practices. Among the group were ten Aurors. From the reports I’ve been given they first found the place to be abandoned. All notes and personal possessions were gone and O’Soule was nowhere to be seen. They began a search of the place when a magical trap was set off. The result being an explosion that leveled the home. I’m still getting reports in, but so far we have fifteen dead. Including four of the Aurors.”

“Merlin, Kingsley! Weren’t they wearing the standard issue robes that protected them from things like that?”

“They were, but it was too strong. It got through the enchantments. Harry, there’s something else,” Kingsley paused, “Ron was inside when it happened.” Harry gripped the arms of the chairs tightly.



"Is he ok?" he asked in a suddenly hoarse voice.

"No. He's in critical condition at St. Mungos at the moment. They lost him a couple of times, but were able to bring him back."

"But he's alive?" Harry asked. Kingsley gave him a shrug before answering.

"For now, but I'm told it's touch and go."

Harry sat thinking for a moment before struggling up on weak and shaky legs.

"I should go." he said, looking forlornly towards the door. He wanted to rush out right then, but didn't want to offend Kingsley. The Minister on the other hand understood perfectly well and gave a small gesture of dismissal.

"Of course. I understand. I already sent word that if you showed up you were to be extended every courtesy and privilege as if it was me there instead of you. See to Ron. Maybe you can help him."

Harry gave a grateful nod and was out of the room in seconds. He barely noticed as the whispers resumed and people tried to step in his path for a word or two. He just plowed right through them all. A juggernaut of worry and impatience.

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St. Mungos was in chaos when Harry arrived. There was so many wounded that they had to use an entire floor to tend to them. When he first walked through the floo he was greeted by a nondescript Auror, who led him through security and pushed past the reporters who were clamoring for a statement from Harry.

“Sorry about that, Mr. Potter. We couldn’t keep something like this covered up for long. Within ten minutes of the wounded being brought in the reporters arrived. A couple of them confounded the guards and snuck past, but we took all their wands away to stop that from happening again.”

“It’s ok. I understand perfectly how sly reporters can be over a picture or a story.”

The man, Harry still didn’t know his name, chuckled and gave a nod. “You would at that, wouldn’t you? Well here you go,” he said arriving at a white double wide door, with a symbol of two broken wands crossed in a weird sort of ‘M’ pattern.

“You’ll find Senior Auror Weasley and family at the last door on the left. You’re alone here except for hospital personnel and security.”

“Thanks for your help. I’ll find you when I’m ready to leave.” The man gave a nod and walked back towards his post. Harry spared him a single glance before walking through the doors into a scene of horror.

Healers were running around the place, trying to save life and limb of who ever needed it. There weren’t enough rooms, so cots were lined along the walls, full of patients, who were groaning in pain, or screaming in agony. Harry saw one wizard holding a stump of a hand in front of his face with a dumbfounded expression of his face. He saw another laying on his cot with the entire right side of his face burned to a crisp. And these were the just those that didn’t warrant a room to themselves for the more extensive injuries.

Harry dragged his eyes away from the ruined bodies of the others and made his way down the hall to Ron’s room. When he walked in he saw Arthur, Molly, Ginny and Hermione, arguing with a couple of healers in low voiced. Everyone turned towards him and he saw Hermione’s face go slack with relief. A moment later she was in his arms, crying into his chest.

“Oh, Har-Harry!” she sobbed, “It’s so bad. They’re saying he might not make it.” she broke down completely at the last and he had to hold her up, to keep her from falling to her knees.”

“Shhhh, it’ll be alright. I won’t let him die, Hermione. He’s my brother. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“You have to help him Harry, you just have to!”

“I will, I will.” He looked over to his friend and tensed. He was a mess alright. There were patches of third degree burns over his body, and where there wasn’t, there were second and first. What really made Harry tense up, was that he was missing the lower half of his leg. The Healers seemed to be doing something about that though, since there was a long flat pan with a thick red liquid that the stump was resting it. Harry could see a red glow with fibrous whips of maroon, being pulled from the liquid towards the stump, sewing and growing the limb back, inch by slow inch.

Harry finally led Hermione over towards the Weasleys' and the two Healers. He spared a glance towards Ginny, who was puffy eyed and understandably distraught. Both she and Arthur had their arms around Molly, who was looking in a down right sad state.

“How is he?” He asked the Healers, needing to get the information quickly.

“He isn’t good. The burns have put his body into a state of shock. He’s lost a great deal of blood, but we have him on a steady stream of replenishing potion to take care of that. We will be able to grow the limb back, but it’s his mind that’s in the greatest danger now. He might not ever recover if we can’t pull him back.”

“What do you mean?”

The Healer rolled his eyes, having already given the explanation once before.

“He’s in shock. Usually when something like this happens, the patient will withdraw into themselves in an attempt to save the mind from a reality it can’t accept right then. This explosion however, carried another side affect that we are seeing with most of the other patients. A magical comatose to put it simply. Some sort of curse is affecting

his mind. It's as if the curse is simply making him lose the will to live. If he doesn't start fighting soon, he won't last the night."

Molly sat heavily on the ground and Ginny and Arthur followed her for comfort. Hermione clutched at him harder than ever, but had regained control and put on a brave face.

"What can be done?" she spared him from asking, but the Healer just gave a shrug.

"Nothing. It's up to him now. We've got enough pain killers in him to numb even the Cruciatus Curse, and get to heal the burns. If he can pull through and start fighting he should be ready to leave in a week. It's this night that will make it or break it. Now, please excuse us, we have other patients to see."

Everyone stared hopelessly as the curt and unsympathetic healer left with his apprentice to tend to others; others that were probably much easier to help and with less demanding families to pester him. Reluctantly, as if afraid to face the truth, the group of miserable and forlorn friends and family, moved to gather around Ron's mangled body. Hermione made to take his hand, but thought better of it as it was heavily burned, and with a sad little sniffle; let her own drop down to her lap.

No one said anything for the longest period. Hermione sat on one side of Harry, Ginny on the other. Each had an arm and rested their head on his shoulder to watch Ron's ragged breaths. Each sending silent pleas for him to fight. To find a way through the magic and come back to them.

After close to an hour of sniffles, yawns, and tears, Hermione broke the unspoken rule of silence and asked the question.

"Harry? Do you know what happened?"

"Yeah..." He didn't elaborate further though, not wanting to go into detail with Ginny right there. Everyone was looking at him though and he knew he couldn't escape without the truth. Anything else and Hermione would shred the story in half.

“He was leading a raid this morning on a suspect’s home. It was trapped and when he was inside a magical bomb went off. That’s about all I know.”

There was another pregnant silence.

“Harry,” Ginny finally spoke up, “Last night...you said that they were going to raid Eric’s home and arrest him. Was it his manor? Did he do this?”

He didn’t say, but his silence was all the answer anyone needed. Ginny’s fingers dug painfully into his arm as she went off into her own thoughts. Everyone else was having a similar reaction. Thinking of the man they had invited into their home. The man that might have murdered Ron.

Another hour later a nurse came by with some food and tea for everyone and laid it quietly on a table before departing without a word. She did check his vitals before leaving, but gave a slight shake of her head that nothing had changed.

“Is my husband going to die Harry?” Hermione asked in a broken voice. A sound that Harry would never want to hear in his worst nightmares.

“I don’t know Hermione. It’s not looking good.”

Molly and Arthur looked at each other and it was Arthur who asked the question that Harry was waiting for. For some reason, some odd quirk of the magic, what he wanted to do had to be broached by someone of blood relation. He couldn’t offer it on his own. The help needed to be sought after.

“Harry. You obviously have a strong command of some pretty obscure magic. Is there anything you can do for Ron? Can you save my son?”

Harry pinned the fatherly figure of his down with an intense stare that startled the man momentarily.

"Are you asking for my help, Mr. Weasley? Do you have no other options? Is my help a last resort?"

"Harry, of course-"

"It's important, Mr. Weasley. Are you asking for my help as a last resort in saving the life of your son?"

Mr. Weasley looked him over, trying to ascertain the meaning behind asking a question that had such an obvious answer. Placing his trust in Harry, he followed the pattern of speech that Harry was trying to provide.

"Yes. I, Arthur Weasley, am asking your aid in saving the life of my son, Ron Weasley. The healers said there could be nothing else done for him. I-I don't know what to do Harry. Please...help him."

Harry gave a brisk nod and a relieved, if strained smile.

"I've been waiting for one of you to ask that. I know something that might work, but you had to seek my help rather than have me offer it." He stood up, pulling away from the confused women and went over to the writing table that had a set of quills and parchment. He spent a minute writing out a note in that same scratchy, messy handwriting that he still had since school. Then he rolled it up and stood.

"Sirius!" he called out. A second later, outside the window, a burst of flame ignited and a bright red Phoenix, with bands of various yellow hues, appeared. With a couple of flaps it settled on the sill until Harry could open the window.

"Sirius," he said to his faithful companion, once he was settled on his arm, "I need you to take this note to Lily, no matter where she is. Stay with her until she gets the items I need. Take her to the house if she needs to, but make it fast. Ron's life depends on it."

"Hermione," he turned towards her, "Can you track down a Healer and tell them I need some Selephix potion?"

Hermione puzzled over the request; it was very odd after all.

“Harry,” she said, “That’s used for making animal’s luminescent. What possible use could it have in healing Ron?”

“It’s not only used for making animal’s glow, if you infuse obsidian dust in five parts per, it can make magical signatures light up like Christmas bulbs.”

She gasped in surprise.

“I never thought of that before! Obsidian attracts the Ragdaman Theory!”

“Yup, and if applied to say...a scrying crystal, what would happen?”

“You could trace the magical properties of any spell in the body or...the mind!”

Harry gave her a wink and a pat on the shoulder. “Go get me the potion Hermione, times running out.”

“Oh, yes of course.” She hurried away to get the potion.

Ginny pulled him away to whisper to him alone.

“Harry, what are you going to do? Can you really help him?” Harry gave her a grim look and a small shrug.

“Possibly. What I want to do is dangerous, but it’s all I can think of. I have to try Gin. You know I have to.” She bit her lip and then impulsively reached up on her toes to kiss him lightly on the lips.

“We trust you, Harry. You know that. Do what you have to.” She turned away, but Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her back towards him.

“Ginny, why did you leave this morning? No word, nothing at all. Did I do something wrong.”

"No!" she shook her head, "It's not you, at least not entirely you. It's partially me. Don't worry, Harry. I'm still going to give this a try, just - let's not have this talk right now. My brother's dying." she brought her arms around herself in a gesture of self comfort that Harry found adorable. He gave in and ran a hand through her hair fondly without saying a word.

"Well, I better get started, then. It will take awhile to prepare."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, take your Mum and Dad home. Go find the rest of the family. But no matter what, keep them away for six hours. If I'm disturbed once I begin it could kill both me and Ron."

She hesitated a moment before agreeing and moving over to her parents. It took them a good five minutes to convince Molly to leave her dying son's side, but Arthur finally brought her around and Harry was left alone with his best friend.

He looked at the burned skin, the torn limb and the stuttering chest sadly. Then with precise movement, he drew a pentagram around the bed with his wand. Then he sat and waited for Lily and Hermione to come back with what he needed. It was all he could do for the moment.

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The sounds of scratching quills and hushed whispers, in the Gryffindor common room, was doing more to distract Lily from her work than a marching band next to her ear. She was going over her essay for the second time and her friends still told her it wasn't up to Professor Weasley's standards. It was moments like this that she wished she was back in the states. They had an educational standard there, not different rules set up from teacher to teacher. How could



anyone find a rhythm when every class differed so much? All Dad said was that it would be harder, but fun. Not unfair and grueling.

Her private musings, and the concentration of the entire house, were disrupted as a ball of bright flame erupted over her table, causing her and her friends to flinch away.

“What the-” various voices called out, and a couple of people gave short little barks of surprise at the show. Lily was hastily patting out a small tether of flame that had landed on her long essay and was muttering some choice ideas on what she would do to who ever had cast a fire hex over her homework when the soothing song of Sirius filled her ears. Her head snapped up in surprise to see her father’s Phoenix on the table in front of her.

“Sirius?” she asked in confusion, “What are you doing here?”

Before the majestic bird could reply a chorus of ‘ooohs’ sounded through out the room.

“Lily, that’s a Phoenix standing on our homework!” Juliana exclaimed in a wonder filled voice.

“Yeah, it’s Sirius, but what’s the ruddy thing doing here of all places?”

“You know it?”

“Yeah, he’s my fathers.” Lily replied without thinking. She knew immediately she should have kept her mouth shut, but it was too late.

“Yeah right. Like your father owns a Phoenix, O’Dowell.” A nasal voice from behind her sneered. She whipped her head around to glare at Fergeson; a cocky boy in her year, who always gave her a hard time for being raised in the states; or colonies as he tended to still call them.

“No one owns a Phoenix, Fergeson. He’s a friend that’s bonded to my father, but I can understand how you could mistake something like that with your intelligence.”

“What ever. It’s more likely Professor Weasley’s sisters. The one that was hatched during the Grand Merlin Maze. Look, it’s got a note for you.” His sneer turned into a leer as he continued, “In more trouble again probably. Going to cost us more points?”

“Just ignore the prat, Lils,” Mark told her, sending a glare to her dorm-mate, “Go on. Open the letter.”

Lily took the advice and turned her back on the up tight arse and took the letter from Sirius’s beak. It had her father’s seal on it, and she snapped it open with a touch of her wand. She opened the envelope and took the letter out and read it silently. Her eyes growing wider and wider with each passing sentence. He couldn’t be serious.

“Blimey Lils! That letters from-”

Mark and his big mouth was silence as Lily saw him reading over her shoulder and slapped a hand over his mouth. She leveled a furious and demanding glare at the stunned boy, till she thought he knew to shut up. When she removed her hand, the entire room, including Juliana, was looking at the scene with a great deal of suspicion.

“Don’t worry about who it’s from, Mark. You shouldn’t read other people’s mail.”

“But Lils! What’s ‘He’ doing writing a letter to you?”

“None of your business,” she replied through gritted teeth. Juliana couldn’t keep her curiosity under check anymore and took the opportunity to snatch of letter from her friend’s hand.

“Hey! Give that back!” Lily cried and dove over the table and an alarmed Phoenix to try to get the request back, but she was too late. Juliana had moved away and read the name at the bottom. Her eyes shot open wide and her mouth formed a comical ‘O’. When Lily finally got around the table she snatched the letter away right before Fergeson had a chance to reach it.

“Come on O’Dowell,” he taunted, making a grab for the letter, “Don’t keep us in suspense. Tell us who your father is and how he’s so

important to have a Phoenix send you a letter. What did he do? Steal it?"

"Father!" Mark suddenly shot to his feet and was backing away from Lily, quickly hitting the wall. "Your fathers...Really Lils?"

She looked between both a horrified Mark and a floored Juliana before closing her eyes and with a resigned sigh nodded her head. She knew her father was really famous and that he warned her that there might be reactions like this, but she didn't realize the extent of what he meant till she saw a trembling Mark and a normally chatty Juliana struck speechless. She'd have to get to the bottom of this when she got the stuff delivered to him.

"Yeah, it's true, but shut up, the both of you. It's no one else's business. Got that?" she emphasized the last with a harsh look around the room. People gave a shrug and started to go back to their homework. Except for Fergeson, who had moved into a corner to watch the whole episode.

Lily spent a moment making sure everyone, except for the prat of course, was back to doing what they were doing before. She guessed even the appearance of a phoenix wasn't enough to daunt the fear of Professor Weasley returning to teach Transfiguration. She tucked the note into her robe and started to gather her things. She had a feeling she was going to get in trouble for this, but maybe if she showed the faculty the note from her father they would let her off the hook. Maybe? She shook away thoughts of the future and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Lily," she turned to Juliana and Mark who were both standing by each other now and looking at her nervously. She mulled the situation over in her mind and with a motion of her head, left the common room. Her friends met her outside the portrait, where she waited to begin the explanation.

"So, I guess I have some explaining to do."

“I’d say so! Blimey Lils,” Mark was shaking his head, “Your dad is Harry Potter and you’re keeping that a secret? Why? You’d be the most popular girl in school!”

“Because, I’m not supposed to tell anyone. Why are you both so strung up over this anyway? I know my father is famous or something, but you two looked like a deer caught in head-lights.”

“Errr, head-lights?”

“Muggle term; Well?”

“Because, Lily,” Juliana was wringing the front of her robes with her hands, “It’s Harry Potter. The-Boy-Who-Lived. Being his daughter is a really big deal, don’t you see?”

Lily couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“The-Boy-Who-What?” she laughed again, “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. What is that supposed to mean?”

“.....”

“.....”

She looked at both the silent and speechless friends and a fresh wave of mirth threatened to bubble up from their expressions.

“Anyways, I’m sure you can tell me all about it, but I have to do something for my Dad, I’ll see you guys later tonight.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Mark. He still had that star struck look on his face. Like he had awakened from a dream and wasn’t sure what was reality or fiction.

“I...have to do some things.” she replied.

“What kind of things?” asked Juliana, “Can we help?”

Lily hesitated. She could use the help. A distraction would be pretty nice.

“Ok, if you guys don’t mind getting into trouble. We could end up spending a week in detention.”

“Wicked!” exclaimed Mark, who was getting into the idea the more he thought about it. Helping out and befriending the daughter of Harry Potter would certainly one up Fergeson and his toady Lavenhurst.

“Ok, follow me. We have to go down to Hogsmead and snatch something from my house.”

“Leave Hogwarts?” Juliana jumped and looked around nervously. “I’m not sure I want to do this now.”

Lily was growing impatient. Harry was waiting.

“Well then stay. I have to hurry though. I’ll see you back here. Come on Mark, I know a secret way out.” She turned and started to run down the long flights of steps towards the ground floor.

“Coming!” he said and started after her. A minute later Juliana caught up to them, slightly winded and with a wounded expression.

“Jeeze guys. You were supposed to try to convince me to come. Not leave me standing there looking like a scared second year!” Lily smiled.

“You didn’t look like a scared second year.” she told her friend.

“Really?”

“You looked like a scared first year.” That remark was rewarded with a tongue. Lily giggled as they come to the statue that the letter told her of.

“Look around the corners,” she told her friends, “Make sure no one is around.”

So far they hadn't run into any trouble. It was still mid day however, so students out of house on a Sunday wasn't a problem. Still, her heart was beating so fast that if she had the misfortune of meeting a Professor, she would probably have been given detention just from the look on her face.

She shook away that terrible thought and focused on the statue in front of her. She pulled the letter out of her robes and read the part over one more time. Satisfied she had it down she leaned closer to the statue and muttered the password under her breath. She let loose a started squawk and leapt back in surprise as the cumbersome thing moved away from the wall slightly. Mark and Juliana rushed around the corner at the sound and their jaws dropped at the sight.

"Lils', where'd ya learn about this?"

"From my Dad's letter. Come on lets go before someone sees us!" She slipped through the narrow opening. With the two comrades in mischief soon behind them they had to use a Lumos to light their way after the statue had closed up.

It was obvious, even from the pale and poor wand light, that no one had trod this passage since the time that Harry and his friends had stolen through them. Thick forests of spider webs seemed to create of maze of silvery silken strands that had to at times be blown away by a spell or two. It was slow going and they were about half way down the path when Juliana shrieked so loud that the other two dropped their wands. When the wands were once more in hand they directed the light towards Juliana, who was pressed against a dirty wall and crying in fear.

"Jules'?! " Mark asked, moving over to the young girl quickly in concern, "What's wrong?"

She didn't have the strength to answer and just continued to stare at something. Mark and Lily looked at each other and then followed her gaze.

"Sweet Merlin!" Mark gasped and backed against the wall next to Juliana. Lily was able to keep hold of her self, but just barely.

On the ground was an old skeleton. A horrifying visage that still had old rotted clumps of skin still on it. A perverse and morbid curiosity overcame Lily and she knelt down to examine the corpse more closely. It had been dead many years, she saw, but probably still in her lifetime. The robes it once wore were chewed and tattered. Barely still in one piece, having been eaten by rodents and close to disintegration by the elements. She saw something lying next to it and directed her wand light closer. It was a mask. A mask in the terrifying visage of a broken and fanged skull.

"Mark," Lily whispered, "look at this. What do you make of it?" She picked up the masked and moved to show him.

Juliana was still in a nearly catatonic state and had her eyes screwed shut and was rocking herself back and forth. Mark on the other hand in typical boy fashion, got over his surprise and was as curious now as Lily. He moved his wand over the mask and studied it a moment. He pulled it from Lily's hands and examined it more closely.

"Not sure," he shrugged, "Looks spooky. Hey! This would be a great Halloween mask! Mind if I take it with us?"

Lily didn't care one way or the other as long as it was out of her sight. She wanted to stay a bit and look at the skeleton closer, but they had to get Juliana away, who was whimpering now and close to bolting or fainting. Either one wouldn't be good.

"I don't care, just put it away and get moving. Come on Juliana, let's get away from here." Lily said. Juliana quickly agreed and they continued down the webbed and musty path.

"Who do you think it was? Mark asked.

"How am I supposed to know? Let me use my amazing powers of divination to divine the deceitful declaration!" she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, but the way there was still old skin on it-"

“Can we PLEASE, talk about something else?” Juliana begged from between them. Lily grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Yeah, Mark was just about to shut up about it, weren’t you, Mark?”

“Errr...Yeah. Sorry Jules”

“Stop calling me Jules’!” she whispered.

“Ok, Ok, Juliana.” Lily could see something ahead and motion for them to be quiet.

“I think we’re almost there,” she told them, “I see something ahead of us.”

They began to move more in earnest. Each eager to be free of the old confining space of the tunnel. They came at last to a set of stone stairs that led up to a wooden door. Carefully Lily inched the wooden open and took a look around. It was a storage room. She pushed the door aside and moved up and out of the way. Soon the three of them were breathing fresh air and looking around. It seemed to be a candy store of some kind. Boxes and crates were filled with different kinds of sweets. Lollipops, chocolate frogs, flying candy canes; there were hundreds of different things in the room.

“I think were in Honey dukes.” Mark told them.

“Honey dukes?” Lily asked.

“Yeah. It’s a sweet store in Hogsmead. We must be right in the middle of the town.”

“That’s good then,” she told her friends, “My house isn’t too far from here. Maybe a couple of blocks.”

Juliana spoke. “But it’s obvious that we shouldn’t be in Hogsmead. Someone is bound to see us and make us go back to the castle. We’ll be in real trouble then.”

Lily thought for a moment.



“Do either of you know any glamour charms?” They both shook their head.

“We’ll just have to brave it then. Cover our faces and hurry as fast as possible. If anyone tries to stop us, we run for it. If we get separated make your way back here and go back to the castle. Got it?” They both nodded and pulled their robes a little over their faces.

They crept out of the cellar and past an elderly man and woman who were moving some things around on the shelves. They almost got caught when one of them turned around, but they were able to duck behind a shelf in time. When a patron with a little child came in they used the chance and dipped through the open door. The streets were bustle with activity as families and couples were moving from shop to shop on an average day in the Wizarding world. A few gave the trio a curious, but amused stare, but no one tried to stop them. Kids would be kids after all and no one wanted to bother taking them back to the castle, or had the heart to stop their little adventure.

Lily led them down some allies and over a couple of streets. It took about ten minutes, but she finally brought them to a comfy building that was part shop and part house. A few people were mingling outside the closed shop to look at some of the merchandise through the window. Lily didn’t want to be seen walking in so she took them around back.

“Is this it, Lily?” Juliana asked her. She nodded in reply.

“Yeah. My Dad runs his business here and we live upstairs.”

“Harry Potter owns Perfect Protections?” Mark asked in astonishment. Lily didn’t think it was such a big deal and just gave a small shrug before walking up to the back door. She tuned out the barrage of questions Mark started to ask her and took out her wand. She pressed it to a symbol on the back door and tried to remember what her father had told her.

“Right before might.” she uttered and with a pale pink glow the door clicked and swung open. “Oh good. I got it right.”

“Got it right?” Juliana asked in a strangled voice. “What would have happened if you got it wrong?”

“I guess we would have woken up in the Ministry cells for breaking and entering.” Juliana and Mark both made some strangling noises behind her back as she walked into her home.

Her father had done some work in the month she had been away. The storage room in the back of the house had finally been organized and labeled. It used to be a hopeless mess and they had to search for whatever they needed. She took them past the back room and into her fathers main work room. It was dark so she lit up the glow bulbs along the walls.

“Wow!” both her friends breathed at the sight. All along the room were various objects all in some state of work. One was rotating slowly over a cauldron, absorbing the vapors that came out. Another was sitting over a purple flame and still another was just dancing in the air, seeming to do nothing else.

“This is so cool.” Mark told her, moving over to look at the thin rod that was pulling in the cauldron’s vapor. He started to reach out to touch it before Juliana grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“Don’t touch stuff. It isn’t yours and you could blow us all up.” Mark was about to argue when Lily confirmed Juliana’s statement.

“She’s right Mark. All of this is really dangerous right now. They aren’t finished and can be deadly. Best not to touch anything.”

Her friend gulped and took another step back and stood next to Juliana, eyeing the now ominously thin rod. Lily pulled out the letter with the list and set to work. She went to a large cabinet and opened it up. Inside were dozens of gems and rocks, even a diamond the size of a thumbnail. She began to look through a couple of the sealed bags until she found what she wanted and tucked away the glossy black shards into her robe.

“What was that?” Juliana asked her.

“Obsidian.”

“What’s it for?”

“Beats me, Dad just needs it.” she said and then knelt down under one of the benches and pulled out a box.

“Look in the other boxes. Look for a large crystal about the size of your hand.” she told them.

“We won’t get killed will we?” Lily rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“No your idiots. He wouldn’t keep something dangerous just lying in boxes. That stuff is stored in a protected place. Just keep looking, I gotta get something else, then we can leave.”

Juliana and Mark nodded and began to look through all the boxes for the crystal. While they were diverted, Lily snuck through a black doorway on the other side of the room. The room beyond was always lit. It was spacious, but didn’t have much in it. Each item was meticulously separated from the other. Shelves lined each wall, all glowing or flickering with a different variety of protections for each item. Potions boiled in stoppers. Little dark insects banged themselves inside jars, but the most dangerous items couldn’t be seen, the protections around them were so powerful and many. Lily walked across the room to another door way and hesitated. She had never been beyond this door. It was the most important rule of the house. No one, for any reason but Harry was to go inside. Now her dad was telling her to break that rule and bring something out.

She raised her wand, like instructed and placed it inside the thin hole in the center.

“Oparius et Simina et Farius et tu Apsa!” she whispered. The door seemed to shimmer and literally melted away before her eyes. Even her jaw dropped at the room beyond.

The walls were plastered with silver and gold. How they held up to the weight she didn’t know. Along the walls odd runes were glittering

and shifting as if alive. They moved and writhed in complicated patterns forming new runes each time they brushed each other. The bands of silver moved to strike like snakes when three or more runes threatened to collide and forced them away. It was the strangest sight she had ever seen.

In the room were four items. One on each wall resting on a pedestal and a velvet pillow. In the center was a large and old book that seemed like it was torn in half. A glass jaw rested over the top and the jar itself had its own runes as well. She was specifically told not to go near the book. No matter what. The item she needed was on the other side of the wall. She pulled out the letter once more and read the instructions carefully.

She moved over to the far right wall, stepping on the stones that would be safe until she reached the item there. She then waved her wand over the item and incanted the words to negate the defenses.

“Illuminus Valdra Octo.” The haze fell away and she picked up the cloth. It was a large cloak that seemed to shimmer. The ends were frayed and slightly tattered, but it was still in excellent shape. She threw the cloak over her and vanished from sight. Her view shifted slightly and the world took on a graying view from under the cloak. She could see two large shadowy figures guarding the item on the far wall. She was told that with the cloak they wouldn’t see her or harm her.

She followed yet another patterns of stones, having to almost walk around the room twice before she finally came before the two creatures. They were vague and hazy. Like shadows and smoke they stood, or floated, she couldn’t tell which, on either side of the item. She raised her wand once more and pointed it at the item. Following the last set of instructions she weaved a figure eight sign and muttered the words as softly as she could. It was a long password.

“Conjuvius Electo et Fina tu Finite.” she slashed her wand down.  
“Apsu Paramosa et Fina tu Finite” she slashed her wand up.  
“Parsalius Imbivia, Juxtavius Augusto.”

She steeled her self and lightly toughed the item with the tip of her wand. Beside her each figure shrieked and was blown away by the expulsion of the enchantments. The gloom given off by them faded away and the item rose slightly off its cushion. Ready for grasping.

She carefully reached out and took the wand. It was long and white, with what seemed like bubbles infused in the white wood. Large towards the base and growing progressively small towards the tip. She was tempted to try and cast a spell with it, but her father told her to do so would bring her great harm.

Safe now, with the wand in hand she took off the cloak and moved back towards the other pedestal. She folded it up and placed it back on the velvet, reenacting the protections that were temporarily down.

"You owe me one, Dad." she said and walked out of the room, shutting and relocking the door behind her.

Back in the work room, Mark and Juliana were waiting.

"What took you so long? We were worried!" Juliana asked immediately. Mark scoffed.

"She was worried. I knew you were ok."

"You liar! You were about to charge through the door to rescue her!"

"Was not!"

"Was to!"

"Was not!"

"Enough!" Lily screamed. "By Merlin's saggy left bottom. The two of you could make a dementor kiss its self! I'm fine and I got what I needed. Did the two of you get the crystal?"

Looking ashamed the two nodded and Juliana held up the sphere.

“Good. It’s time to go then. Head back to the castle. I have to go give this stuff to Dad.”

“We aren’t coming with you?” Mark asked indignantly.

“No, you can’t. I’m taking Sirius to St. Mungos. I might not be back till late.”

“You can’t just leave us here Lily,” Juliana said, “We risked our necks to help you. Take us with you. If we get caught we won’t have the protection that you do. You’re going to get us in trouble again.”

“It’s not like that Juliana.”

“Yes it is. Whenever we help you on your silly schemes, we get in more trouble than you do.”

“Not for the potion! I got in trouble for that one.”

“That’s just once in five times now? If you leave us to hang out to dry for this one, Lily, we won’t ever speak to you again!”

“Honestly, Jul-”

“She’s right, Lils,” Mark said, “You’re taking us with you all the way on this one. Besides, how often do we get a chance to meet the great Harry Potter?”

“I don’t see what’s so great about him. You guys don’t have to do his chores or smell his socks!”

“Don’t change the subject Lils’. We’re going with you.”

Lily threw up her arms. “Fine! If I get yelled at for bringing you lot, you’re both going to be doing my homework for a month.”

Mark and Juliana looked at each other for a moment and nodded.

“Deal!” they both said. Lily rolled her eyes and then took the Crystal from them and placed it with the other items.

“Sirius!” she called out into the air. A moment later the Phoenix that had been a staple in her life appeared in a bright flash of fire. “Change of plans, Sirius. You have to take us all to St. Mungos. These thickheads won’t let me go otherwise.”

Sirius let loose a short and curt trill.

“I know, I know, but they’re my friends. I can’t let them get in trouble for me again. Please take them?” The bird seemed to ponder it a moment before it flapped its wings a couple of times.

“Ok guys, he agrees. Come and hold his tail.”

Mark and Juliana shuffled over with smiles plastered all over their faces and took the large fanning tail of Sirius.

“This is so neat!” Mark said, “I get to apperate with Harry Potter’s Phoenix and meet the man himself! Wait till my brother hears about this. He won’t believe me.”

Lily pursed her lips, but didn’t have time to rebuke him as they felt their world vanish in a flash of light. It wasn’t like apperating, where you feel yourself squeezed through a hole. It was like being broken up painlessly into thousands of pieces and moved around. When they were put back together they found themselves in a lobby in front of a very startled Auror.

“What the- Who are you lot?” he asked, drawing his wand and eyeing the three children suspiciously. Lily stepped forward and held out her hand.

“Hello, I’m Lily Potter. My father sent for me. These are my friends sent to look after me. It’s very important that I see my Dad right away. I have something for him.”

The Auror had an eye brow raised and was very skeptical.

“Harry Potter’s daughter eh? And I’m Merlin’s long lost son. Come on you lot. Back to school with you. Old McGonagall won’t be happy with some of her students leaving the school to bug Harry Potter.”

Lily didn’t really know what to say. Why wouldn’t he believe her?

“But I really am his daughter! Well, adopted anyways. He sent for me. Go check with him, he’ll tell you.”

“Harry Potter’s best friend is lying dying in a bed and you three are itching for an autograph. Unbelievable. I’m not going to bother him over this silly nonsense. Let’s go.”

“No! I’m not lying! Go check with him! He needs some stuff to help out his friend! He sent me to get them from our house. He’s tall; he stoops a bit when too many people look at him. He’s shy around crowds, but has a nice smile. He likes kids, but hates bullies. He used to read me bed time stories after my other dad died. When he reads at night it’s always with pumpkin juice and real close to the fire so he can head the crackle of the flames. Please believe me!”

The Auror still looked skeptical, but the impassion, almost crying, young girl in front of him convinced him to take the risk. If he was wrong and she really was Harry Potter’s adopted daughter then not letting her through would kill his career. If he let her through and it was just a fan, all he would get would be a scolding from his superiors. The lesser of two evils.

“Ok. Follow me. I warn you though; if you’re lying, I’ll march you back in chains, right into Hogwarts, in front of the whole school. Got it?”

The three children gave a nervous nod and followed after him; their Hogwarts robes swaying behind them as they hurried to keep pace with the taller man. He took them past some reporters who looked at the bunch, but pawned it off to some kids who had Auror parents. It was a close guess, but they weren’t bothered as the Auror took them through a pair of large white doors.

The three of them stopped at the scene. Juliana grew green and ran over to a waste bucket and lost her lunch. Mark and Lily weren’t far



off, but were able to hold the contents of their stomach down; albeit with great effort. The Auror had waited for them and actually gave Juliana and sympathetic pat on the back before pulling her along. When they reached the last door in the hall way he told them to wait here and went inside the room.

Not more that a minute passed before he came out again and told the three they could enter. He apologized to Lily for giving her such a hard time and tried to make her understand that he was just doing his job. She didn't reply, but gave him an indifferent, but frosty look. He took the hint and made his way back towards his post.

Lily pushed through the door with Mark and Juliana following shyly behind her. The room was an almost cold white, with a few wizarding portraits around, but empty. A table to their left, against the wall, held a pan and some potions with a fresh roll of gauze. Against the other wall as a bed that held Ron Weasley, and next to the bed was her father, Harry Potter.

Harry looked at the three timid children calmly, but with pursed lips. He studied each face in turn before standing up from his seat and walking over.

"Where is Sirius?" was the first thing he asked. Lily looked started and looked around in confusion.

"Ummm, I don't know. I totally forgot about him when he brought us here. Harry just nodded and reached out to brush something off her shoulder. He looked her up and down to make sure she was alright.

"I assume you brought the items?" his voice sounded mildly accepting, but she could tell there was a hint of anger or annoyance there. This wasn't good.

"Yeah, right here." she said softly and untied the bag at her side and handed it over to him. He looked inside and nodded. He pulled out the wand and gave it a close inspection before nodding satisfaction.

"Thank you, Lily." He hesitated before pulling her into a hug. She loved his hugs. She knew he never had much of them as a kid and he

made up for that by hugging her every time he could. It made her feel really loved and she didn't complain at all. Lots of kids got slaps instead. She counted herself lucky. When he pulled away he looked at her two friends and cocked a brow.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce you all. Dad, this is Juliana Evensere and Mark Wallace. Their friends from school. Mark, Juliana, this is Harry Potter, my Dad."

She stepped back to let her father get to know them a bit. He held out his hand and shook theirs.

"Hello," he told the star struck second years. They just nodded dumbly and stood with open mouths to stare at him. Each of their eyes slid up to his forehead at the same time to land on his scar. It was a huge irritation at the time and he let some of his famous temper loose.

"Normally, when someone says hello, you say something back. And my eyes are lower. They aren't in my scar."

They two looked horrified and darted their eyes down much lower. To the floor in fact. The girl mumbled something under her breath that Harry couldn't understand.

"What was that?" Mark looked at Juliana as if she had just insulted the Minister for Magic and leapt to correct the affront.

"She said it's an honor to meet you sir. We've heard so much about you."

Harry chuckled a bit. "I imagine you have, and it's nice to meet the both of you as well. Anyone who is willing to befriend that little brat behind you must have some guts."

"Hey!" Lily protested, but quickly shut up at the look he gave her. She says that it was coming and coming fast. She started to inch away.

"I assume you two have an amazing adventure to tell me." Mark leapt at the bait before Lily could stop him.

“Oh yeah! It was wicked. We snuck through an old tunnel; hid out in Honeydukes, cool place by the way; then Lily took us inside your house-”

“Inside you say?” Lily flinched, “I hope you liked it.”

“Oh yeah. She showed us your work room too.”

“Really?! What a treat!” Lily groaned and started to inch away some more.

“You have so many cool things there. There was this rod that seemed to eat up the smoke. I almost touched it, but Juliana stopped me, and then Lily told me it was dangerous and not to touch anything unless she said so.”

“Lily!” Harry said sweetly, but with a dangerous glint in his eye, “I’m happy that I’ve taught you enough that you know what to touch and what not to touch.”

“Well, you see. It’s like this.” she started to try and explain, but Harry was having none of it.

“Enough!” he snapped and scowled at the trio. They jumped and Marl and Juliana backed away quickly to stand next to Lily, each suddenly clutching one of her hands as Harry marched down on them, his face blazing with anger.

“Lily Potter. I’ve told you, I don’t know how many times that no one, absolutely no one, is to be in our home. My instructions were clear. You and you alone were supposed to go home and get the items. Did I tell you to bring your two friends?”

She shook her head, not daring to reply.

“Did I tell you to let someone inside?” Again she shook her head.

"You let two students, who don't know the dangers, into my Laboratory! What? I repeat, what possessed you to do something so...so...Stupid?!"

"I don't know..." she whispered, biting back the tears that threatened to well up in her eyes. She knew it had been a bad idea and now she was paying the consequences.

"You don't know? You don't know? Why is that always your answer? I've raised you with enough sense to actually think of reasons behind your actions, yet you always tell me 'you don't know'. Well, I'm sick of it Lily Potter."

"I'm sorry!"

"Sorry doesn't make up for the fact that you put your two friends in danger. I don't think you even understand the danger you were in. Lily, you're protected from things because of spells I've placed on you. They," he pointed to the two students who were now cowering behind her, "are not. All it would have taken was for one of them to touch to trip over something and all of you would have been dead."

"Furthermore, what are you even doing here? I told you to get the items and give them to Sirius to bring here. Not to come here yourself and bring half the student population with you!"

"I wanted to find out what was going on. You always told me never to go into that room. I was scared and worried. I wanted to help you."

Harry saw that her eyes were getting puffy and her lip was starting to tremble. He was still angry, but now relieved that nothing had happened to the three. He buried the fierce look on his face and gave Lily a resigned sigh. He stepped over to her and pulled her into another hug that she returned so hard that she almost squeezed the air out of him. He rested his hand behind her head, kissed the soft threads of her dark hair.

"I know, sweetheart, but you have to stop doing this. One of these days the odds are going to catch up to you and someone is going to

get hurt. You scare me half to death with these little stunts of yours. No more, Lily. Please don't do this anymore."

"Okay," she whimpered into his robes, "I promise. I won't do anything like this anymore."

He smiled down at her as she lifted his head and kissed the tip of her nose.

"I love you, Dad." she told him earnestly. "I'm so sorry."

"It's ok, sweetie. No one got hurt and I love you too." He pulled away and she stepped back into the embrace of her two friends.

"Now, about you're punishments."

"Punishments, sir?" Juliana asked with a note of fear in her voice.

"Yes, punishments. All three of you left the castle. I'm sure that you're professors are angry with you."

"But sir," Mark pleaded, "They won't know unless you tell them."

"Ah, but I'm afraid that one of them already knows?"

"Errr, they do?" he asked nervously.

"Yes. They do," a new voice said behind them.

The three seemed to freeze. Even their breathing stopped and their eyes grew wide with the horror that only a kid could possess.

'It can't be,' Lily thought, 'anyone but her. Please let it be someone else.' Slowly the three turned their heads to look at the figure looming behind them. It was. Hermione Weasley was standing behind them with pursed lips and holding a steaming silvery potion. Her gaze was sweeping along the line like a wave pounding down a shore.

"Evensere, Wallace. Twenty points from each of you and a week's detention."

“What?!”

“Silence!” she snapped, her hair going a little wild. “My husband is dying and I have to deal with three spoiled students! I’m not in the bloody mood to hear a word from any of you! As for you McDowell; I’m not sure what to do with you anymore. I will speak with you later when I have calmed down. If I have calmed down. Now get out of here. All of you!”

They scrambled to make it to the door, but Harry’s voice stopped them.

“Hermione, they are already here and they would need an escort back to the castle. They might as well stay till things are finished, then I can take them back for you.”

Hermione looked like she was about to argue, but Harry stepped closer and put a finger on her lips.

“They did it to help me and to find out what was happening. How many times have we done something similar?”

“Harry, you can’t condone misbehavior on this scale. They need discipline-”

“And they will have disciple,” he interrupted, “but for now, I asked Lily to bring me the things she needed and her two friends just stayed by her side to help her out. Doesn’t that seem familiar to you at all? They will get the detentions and all the points your pretty little heart can deduct, but for now, let’s keep them close at hand.”

Hermione gave a large sigh and nodded with exhausting. She held up the potion to Harry.

“Here’s the Selephix potion. It was murder trying to get one of the healers to give it to me. I had to throw your clout all over the place, and drop your name like a bomb in the right places.” Harry took the potion from her and led her over to the chair.

"Take a seat Hermione. Ginny took her parents off to distract them. I'm almost ready. You three," he called over to the three twelve year old doing their best to remain hidden and small, "Sit down and be quiet. Don't talk, don't move, and definitely don't cast any spells."

"Yes sir." Lily said, "Thanks for letting us stay by the way." Harry raised a brow that quelled the little bit of pride she had managed to muster.

"I want you close because I don't know if Europe can survive the three of you outside of school. Who knows what kind of global disaster you could cause."

"I've never caused a disaster before!"

"Oh? What about that tornado?"

"Oh...ok I'll be quiet."

Harry turned his head and broke into a grin. She never left him a dull moment. He looked down to see Hermione staring up at him curiously for a moment.

"What?" he asked softly, too low for the three students to hear.

"You sound like a parent. I've never heard you talk that way before. It's nice to see."

"Not all the time, Hermione. Lily can bring up the vilest temper in me. She really likes to test authority, but hates dealing with the consequences." He shook his head ruefully.

"Yes, I've noticed." Hermione said wryly. They both shared a laugh, and turned back to Ron.

"What are you going to do Harry?"

"An old spell; or new if you look at it in a certain way. We should get started."

He reached into the bag and pulled everything out. When Hermione saw the wand she gasped in astonishment.

“Harry Potter! What are you doing with that? You were supposed to get rid of it!”

Harry looked at the kids in warning to her and pulled her in close to whisper in her ear.

“I retrieved it when I came back. Some of the spells in the book require a wand like the elder wand. I wanted it safely tucked away and not in some grave that anyone can dig up.”

“But you said-”

“I know what I said Hermione, but that was the ranting of a battle weary kid. I need the wand to do what needs to be done.”

“I don’t understand. Your own wand is plenty powerful.”

“It’s not the power I need, but the concentration. I can cast the spell with little effort with the Elder Wand. That leaves me plenty of concentration to do the search.”

“Search?”

“I’m going to merge with Ron’s mind and try to contact him and pull him back.”

“Harry, that’s dangerous. Very dangerous. What is the spells afflicting him start to affect you as well? You’ll be vulnerable.”

“That’s where you come in. The scrying crystal will work both ways. It will let me look into his mind and let you trace any spells that start to hurt me. You can pick them out one by one and counter them.”

“But what is I don’t know how?”

“Then I’ll probably die with Ron.”



“...don’t say that Harry. Don’t you dare say that to me.”

Harry pulled her into a hug and reassured her that it would be ok.

“I have faith in you Hermione. You won’t let anything happen to me. I have to start now.”

He pulled away and motioned for her to step back. She noticed that there was the faintest glow of a pentagram on the floor that stretched around the bed. Harry poked his old wand and took the Elder in hand. He pointed it towards the fading symbol and it flared anew; a shimmering and pulsing lavender that reached to the ceiling. She had seen similar stuff in the Department of Mysteries, but never one so strong and defined. He then conjured a small wooden bowl and poured the Selephix potion into it.

“Hermione,” he said to her, “I need you to power the obsidian while I work on the crystal. It needs to be very fine.”

“Can I use magic?”

“Yeah.”

She took the shards away from him and set them on the table to get to work. She conjured her own bowl to pulverize the stone and got to work. Meanwhile Harry cast a permanent levitation charm on the crystal sphere and began to utter spell after spell at it. What was once a haze transparent globe was slowly turning into a glowing smoky mirror.

The three Hogwarts students sat transfixed at the sight. They were witnessing magic that none, but perhaps Lily, had ever seen. This was real magic. Not levitation charms and Hinklypuffs. Glowing symbols and flying crystals. The stuff that famous wizards performed that they only read about. Never to be witnessed. This day would be forever engrained in their minds.

Mark leaned over to whisper into Lily’s ear.

“Wow,” he breathed, “You’re Dad really is Harry Potter! He’s amazing”

“Shhhh. Be really quiet and don’t move. I’ve seen him do stuff like this before and it’s never a good idea to distract him. Bad things happen.”

“Bad things?” he asked. She looked at him and then rolled up the bottom of her robe up to her lower thigh. There was a thick jagged scar surrounded by some old tissue that seemed to be an old burn.

“Bad things,” she emphasized grimly. Mark gulped and sat back into the picture perfect image of stillness and patience. Juliana reached out and took Lily’s hand. She knew about the scar, being her dorm-mate and all. Lily never said how she got it, except to say that she was fooling around while her father was doing something dangerous. They all sat and watched the magic across the room.

Hermione was now done, with the stone. It was smashed and smashed again into fine black sand. Nothing larger than a grain was left. She stood up and took it over to Harry who was just now finishing the last piece of magic on the sphere.

“I’m done,” she told him. He gave a nod and took the bowl from her without a word and poured the sand into the Selephix potion. The thick silvery substance took on a creamy white as Harry stirred it in. When he was done he tapped the side of the bowl with his wand and a thin layer of frost appeared around the wood, cooling it dramatically. He then used the wand once more to lower it into the potion. He rotated the globe slowly until the thick sticky substance coated every inch and the bowl was empty. As Hermione watched the creamy white seemed to be absorbed into the crystal until the smoky shine of the reflection cleared and, while still mirrorish, cast no reflection of the room.

“Ok. I’m ready. This is going to take awhile. I won’t be able to speak once I’ve started. It’s important that no one touches me or interrupts the spell. Hermione watch the scrying sphere carefully. Look for changes in color and lines. When a spell tries to imprint itself on me you’ll see something come out of the crystal and try to touch me.

Don't let it. Stop whatever it is in any way you can short of body contact. Got it?"

"Understood."

"And you three," he looked toward the three children, "Not a word or a peep or a movement. No matter what happens don't interfere. Understood?"

"Yes sir." They said together and gave their promise.

"Well then. Let's get started."

He sat down next to the bed and sent the globe to hover over Ron's head. Then he pointed his wand and silently cast the spell with a tense expression of concentration. There was a loud bang and an arch of gold light shot from the wand and hit the sphere, and then rebounded into Ron. The erratic gold light stabilized into a smooth line that bridges the two men and the room fell quiet.

Harry's eyes fell closed and the only sounds were the humming, and sometimes crackle, of the magical bridge. Long minutes passed before Hermione had to make her move. She was watching the sphere closely when she saw the tell tale flicker of a thin black steam gather on its surface. She readied her wand and watched some more. When it struck she was ready. Most black magical signatures were life and energy stealing curses. When it lashed out towards the still form of Harry she was ready.

"Abeos Mumius!" she cried out and the smoky stream ran head long into a faint golden dome that was erected around Harry. The stream continued its assault for a few seconds more until its power was drained and faded away. Then the smartest witch ever to come out of Hogwarts waited for the next.

And the next came. And another, and another. The sheer amount of curses and charms that must have been affecting Ron was daunting. A small library of foulness. She preserved though and kept on blocking anything that the globe through Harry's way.

Midway through the healing Lily had left the room to get Hermione something to snack on and to drink. The Professor was obviously becoming very fatigued so she thought a good cup of joe would do the trick. Not that she was fond of the Professor, but she wasn't so callous as to not hope that her husband lived. Plus she was her father's best friend and had saved his life dozens of times. Or so he told her. It was only polite to help Professor Weasley out.

She tip toes back into the room to see that Harry was still working on the tall red head in the bed. Professor Weasley was valiantly waiting for globe to spit out its next curse when Lily sat the sandwich and cup next to her. Hermione looked at her gratefully, but they didn't say a word. She just nibbled at the snack and took a couple sips of the strong java. Lily had spiked it with a bit of pepper-up potion that worked wonders on the Transfiguration teacher. Hermione was tempted to give the girl a hundred points for her thoughtfulness, but another curse had built up and Hermione let the thought fade away.

It didn't take an hour for Harry to do his work. It took two. Two long grueling hours of delving into the scattered mind of his best friend and pulling him back from the brink. Giving him the strength to hang onto life. The globe hadn't spat out anything for close to an hour and Hermione was resting on the bedside, holding Ron's clammy hand. Lily was laying against Mark and Juliana against her. They were all dozing off, having been lulled to sleep by the soothing hum of the spell that Harry was performing.

When Harry finally opened his eyes he was greeted by the sleeping form of Hermione resting her cheek against Ron's hand. He was bone weary from the delving so far into his friend's mind and he almost fell asleep right after coming out of his spell. He broke the connection with his wand and a loud bang woke everyone up with a jump.

"Harry!" "Dad!" two voices sounded out. There was a pattering of feet and he was pounced on by two females.

"Harry, will Ron be ok?" "Dad, are you alright? I was so worried!"

Harry was laughing weakly as he pried the arms from around his waist and neck.

“Ron will live, and I’m fine, just really tired. I could use a pepper-up.”

“Right away! I’ll be right back. Leave it to Lily, everything will be fine!” she darted out of the room.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other before blurting, “What?”

“I think she went to get some pepper-up potion for you sir.” Juliana told the two confused adults.

True to word, Lily was darting right back in the room a minute later with the bright red drink.

“Here you go!” she thrust it into Harry’s hand. He looked at wryly for a moment before downing the drink.

“Can I ask what happened?” Hermione broke into the father-daughter moment.

“Well, to put in simply so everyone here can understand I bridged the gap between mine and Ron’s mind. I was able to find his buried consciousness and talk to him. I told him what was going on and led him back to a place in his mind that would let him wake up. Eventually. Now, it won’t be quick. He’s going to be out for probably a month. His body should be healed by that time. All he needs is some peace and quiet.”

“That’s it? Just peace and quiet?”

“Yup.”

“Harry, that magic...I’ve seen a lot of things, but that was. I don’t know how to say it. Simply incredible.”

“Yeah well, it was originally made as an instructing spell. I just altered it a bit.”

“Instructing spell?”

“How do you think I learned so much so quickly? You don’t remember me being that bright do you? I had a lot of the knowledge put directly into my head by Dimplewat.”

“Harry, that’s cheating!”

“It wasn’t a test, Hermione,” Harry laughed, “it was just like class. Only faster.”

“It still sounds like cheating.”

“You’re just jealous that you spent years over books and I spent years sleeping.”

Hermione didn’t reply, just gave him a lofty stare and moved back to her husband.

“Can I stay with him?”

“You can. Just don’t make any loud noises. I’ll leave some instructions with the healers on some potions that will help him along.”

“Don’t be too long Harry. You have somewhere to be tonight.”

“Somewhere to-? Merlin, that’s right. Ugh, I’m not looking forward to this.”

“You’ll be fine, Harry. I’ll let Molly and Ginny know that everything’s fine now. You should escort out three truants to the school.”

“Right. Gather your things you three. We’re leaving.”

“What about Professor Weasley’s husband? Aren’t you going to stay with him?”

“He’s out of danger and it helps no one to halt our lives entirely to stand by someone who’s going to be sleeping for the next several weeks.”

“I expect all three of you in my office first thing tomorrow morning.” Hermione told the three students. “Don’t think that we’ve forgotten that you left the school without permission.”

“Yes, Professor Weasley,” they replied. Harry gathered them up and they left the room.

The sun was just beginning its final fall towards sunset when they walked through the front doors of Hogwarts. Harry and decided that since they were already out some ice cream and a nice lunch was in order, since they missed theirs. They spent some time in the Leaky Cauldron and Harry got the opportunity to gauge Lily’s friends.

They were very quiet and shy at first, but the more Harry joked with them the more they opened up. Harry found them interesting, but vastly different than the relationship that he, Ron and Hermione had. For one, Juliana wasn’t nearly as bright as Hermione and tended to stay out of the spotlight. She wasn’t competitive at all. Mark on the other hand hated to lose at anything and always had to try and be better than his peers. He always seemed to have a better story than the next person. It was annoying, but Harry could tell that he was a younger brother that was shoved into the back of the room a lot.

Lily, he knew very well and could tell she was the ring leader. She had picked up his penitent for not following the rules and doing what she thought needed to be done, regardless of the consequences. Admittedly he had pushed that attitude forward in her, but she had taken the bait and the pole too. At one point, in her first year at Academy in the states she was so out of control that he had taken drastic measures to reign her in. She wasn’t nearly as impossible anymore, but spending two months in the frozen Canadian wilderness with no one but your father putting you to work doing every manner of grueling thing he could think of tended to knock that out of a person.

He still had to keep a tight leash on her though, as today proved it. In reflection he decided it might be a good thing, him being forced into the teaching position. It would let him finish the work he had started last year.

When they walked through the doors McGonagall was waiting for them. Her arms were folded and she had that 'look' on her face that Harry remembered far too well from his own days of getting into trouble.

"Mr. Wallace, Miss Everson, Miss O'Dowell. So kind of you to return to Hogwarts." They flinched, all except for Lily, who mistakenly believed she would be spared all but her father's wrath.

"Harry. You're late. The three of you left St. Mungos over an hour ago. Surely it doesn't take you that long to floo here."

Harry fidgeted a bit before his former head-of-house. "Well, the kids missed lunch so I decided to treat them a bit. You can consider it like the last meal of a dying man."

She pursed her lips and narrowed those wizened eyes of hers. "Somehow, I find it hard to believe that, that was the reasoning behind the holiday. We can discuss this later. I need to speak with you in my office before we sort things out."

"I understand, Professor." Her eyes then darted to the three youngsters who were standing silently behind him.

"Go to your common rooms. You're not to leave them at all today." They hurried away without a word. Lily paused just briefly to hug Harry and then was right behind her friends. McGonagall studied Harry for a moment and then stepped forward to embrace him like a mother who hadn't seen her child for years.

"Harry, I've missed you so."

Harry was startled. At the party she had just popped in, forced him into a job and then popped out. She had never shown him this much emotion before. He awkwardly returned the hug and patted her back



a bit. When she finally pulled away he saw the tell tale sign of a possible tear in her left eye.

"It's good to see you too, Professor."

"Oh, please. Call me Minerva. We've been through too much together to stand on formalities."

"I think I'll find that hard Professor. I don't think I can stop seeing you scolding me from behind your desk when I got caught past curfew."

She laughed a merry sound and reached out to touch his cheek fondly. A couple of passing students looked at the scene oddly, but didn't recognize Harry. McGonagall took his hand and lead him through the halls to her office.

"Lemon drop," she said to the gargoyle. Harry looked at her curiously.

"Lemon drop?" he asked

"In honor to his memory. I try to keep some piece of him in the school. His flights of fancy and his whimsical nature. It's hard to do, but dozens of little things like this do well."

Harry thought he was prepared for the feeling of stepping once more into the Headmasters office. He was wrong. Such a torrent of emotions surged through him that he had to fight to stay upright. The room was different of course. There was no plethora of gadgets and magical devices. No perch that held a Phoenix, but there was something that reminded him strongly of Dumbledore. A smell of candy and freshly a groomed beard. A set of books placed just so. A bowl of Lemon drops on the corner of the desk. A curtain on a window that was torn and burnt in some unknown past. Little things like that and one large thing. Right behind the large desk sat his portrait. Larger than all the others.

Minerva stepped aside so as not to interrupt the reunion.

“Professor Dumbledore?” Harry managed to croak out. The old face jerked up a bit and those twinkling blue eyes opened and peaked through the bushy eyebrows. He saw Harry and the eyes flew open.

“Harry? Harry! My boy! Merlin, but you have grown into a fine man!” Harry smiled and took a few steps closer to study the painting better. The small joy about Wizarding portraits was that you got to see the person as you remember and not as they got older and older. Yes, the eyes twinkled and beamed at Harry. A smile as wide as a river broke open the cracked and wrinkled face behind the thick white beard.

“Thank you, Professor. It’s good to see you again.”

“Not nearly as good as it is to see you, Harry. I do not think I can count the times that I badgered and cajoled Minerva to seek you out so that I might have a word or two. As ever, our Illustrious Headmistress maintained, rightly so, that your privacy is your own and that we should not breach upon that age old tradition. That of respect. I will admit that, while understanding, I have been very impatient to speak with you and see how you were getting on with you’re life. My curiosity, an unfathomable engine of trouble, led Minerva and myself into quite a string of arguments.”

Harry smiled at the long winded speech. Just like he remembered. That intelligent banter that marked Dumbledore as a man of distinction and character.

“I’ve had a great life, Professor. I even have a daughter.”

“A daughter! My word, really? Congratulations, Harry. Who is the lucky lady to have captured your heart? Miss. Weasley perhaps?”

“Umm, well no one really, Professor. I adopted her. It seems that Professor Snape had adopted a little girl prior sometime during the war. When he died, she had no one, so I looked after her. I felt it was the right thing to do.”

“You would be correct, Potter. It was the right thing to do. I worry for her intelligence however, having to be subjected to your less than ample wit and skill.”

Harry whipped his head around in surprise to see the portrait of none other than Severus Snape. His jaw was dropped and he couldn't formulate any sort of response at seeing the bitter face and hooked nose of his once most hated Professor.

“Professor Snape...How?”

“Please close your mouth Potter. As usual the past seven years have done little to open that narrow mind and lacking personality. Still an uncouth lout I see.”

Harry pressed his lips together and glared right back. Few things changed it seemed. Even death couldn't rid the man of his mocking and insulting manner. Harry said as much.

“How are you enjoying the space, Professor? Is it big enough for you're ego, or do you need something larger? Like a wall perhaps?”

“Ah, it seems the years have somewhat improved on you're social skills. You could almost keep up with a first year now. Pretexts and rivalries aside, how is Lily? You have kept her safe and healthy at least? I dare not ask if she can read or write, being under your care for so long.”

“I'll have you know that she is very smart and strong. She is healthy and safe. Well as much as I can keep her safe with the trouble she gets into.”

“Merlin, forbid! If you have imprinted her with you're penitent for rule-breaking, then you have already done far too much harm.”

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen. Please, calm down. You can both bantering to you're hearts content another time. For now Severus, please let me speak to Harry. I am sure Miss. O'Dowell has been raised in the finest setting and under the finest care.”

“So tell this doddering old patch of mismatched paint what you have been doing all these years. My curiosity is starved for information.”

“Well, you should curb that Professor. My curiosity got the best of me and I made a right fine mess of things because of it.”

“Why am I not surprised?” sneered Severus, but Harry ignored him.

“Is that so, Harry? What seems to be the trouble?”

“Ummm, could you excuse us please Professor?” he asked Minerva who nodded and left into the side room of the expansive office.

“This must be serious, Harry.”

“It is. I set the Council of Harcast into motion.” Dumbledore’s brows furrowed a bit and his face grew serious.

“I’m surprised that you know that name, Harry. Very few people do. Maybe a dozen outside the council itself knows of its existence. Set them into motion you say? That does not bode well my boy. Not well at all. I assume then, that you found a way into the Pyramid of Pyre?”

“Yes sir and you won’t believe how!”

“Enlighten me, my boy. Enlighten me!”

“I transfigured the wards.”

“Impossible.”

“Ha! You said it! I got you to say impossible. I never once heard you say that word before!”

“Hmmm, you are right. I always tended to shy away from that word, but in this case, what you are saying is impossible. You can’t transfigure raw magic Harry as it is undefined and there is no solid base from for which to anchor the spell into another form.

Harry decided to burst the old man's bubble and went into the long discussion of his travels and his work. Many time he had to stop to argue with the man, or be corrected on one point or another. It took the better part of two hours to catch up with his Grand-father like figure. It was two hours well spent. Even Snape joined the conversation and grudgingly admitted that Harry had become slightly proficient with magic. Even Imperius couldn't get that man to give any real praise at all.

Harry then spent the rest of the night talking to Minerva about the term and his expectations as a Professor of DADA. She went over staff meetings, grading, OWLS, NEWTS, detentions, the point system, punishments and homework. They both missed dinner as a result, but had something brought up to them. When Harry finally trudged to his staff quarters he found that Kretcher had already brought most of his things and connected his fireplace to his home on the private Hogwarts network. That way he could be there in seconds 'when' the council finally made a bid for the book.

As Harry settled down on the bed his mind wandered towards tomorrow morning. He would have to deal with whispers and fan girls again. More so he would have to deal with Lily. She wasn't going to be happy about this, but life was tough. She would get through it. He had decided to just let the truth out. It might make her a target for the council, but at least then he knew she might be a target, rather than expending a lot of effort on the possibility they would go after her. He wasn't using her as bait. He would never do that to her. He was just removing unneeded complications from the equation. Simplifying things for the battles to come.

As he settled down into sleep he wondered how Ginny was doing. He never got to say good-bye and they had barely talked since last night. They needed to straighten things out; Ron needed to wake up, Hermione needed to get her head straight and the Council needed to be dealt with. A lot of things that needed to be done, but no idea how to do them. His dreams that night were a mixture of pleasant and nightmarish.

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A/N - What a wordy chapter. It didn't seem to further the plot very much, I know, but trust me it did. Things happened that no one saw, but will be revealed later on. I also wanted to show Harry knowing more than just battle magic. Spell flinging is fine, but there won't be a ton of that in the story till the end chapters.

PM me any questions you might have. For now I'm tired of this chapter and am going to take a break for a couple days.

## Chapter 14

### Real Defense and Real Darkness

KNOCK, KNOCK. Harry woke groggily to the slight pounding on the door to his quarters. He laid in bed and stared up at the worn stone ceiling for several minutes until another knock startled him from his bleary thoughts. He glanced over at the old fashioned clock and saw that it was barely five a.m.

'Who, in Merlin's name, is knocking on my door at this hour?' He threw a pillow over his head and burrowed under the blankets and tried to tune the third set of knocking out. Fate would deny him that luxurious thing known as sleep, however. He heard the door open and close and a moment later the door to his sleeping quarters was thrown wide.

"Go away!" he shouted from the muffled depths of the wool.

"Mr. Potter, honestly. I don't remember you being prone to a sleep in. It's time to get up and get ready for your first classes."

Harry peeked out from his covers and glared balefully at Minerva.

"It's 5 a.m. Professor. Breakfast isn't for another two hours."

"But you have to go over the class curriculum, student manifest, make notes for your studies, get your class room prepared, prep any unusual devices or creatures you may want to introduce. You have a full morning ahead of you and no time to sleep."

"I was actually just planning to wing it and spent the day fending off questions of my past and getting to know the students." Minerva pursed her lips and raised a single eye brow.

"Up, Mr. Potter." He saw he flick her wand and he grabbed at his covers; barely stopped them from flying away.

"Ok, ok! Let me get dressed."

Minerva politely excused herself into the sitting room while he trudged out of bed and made the trek towards his battered old wooden wardrobe. He creaked the rickety antique open and tilted his head. Sometime during the night the house elves had replaced the few cloths he had brought with him with some dusty old fashioned teaching robes.

“Minerva!” he shouted out, “What did you do with my robes?”

He could have sworn he heard some chuckling from the other side of the door.

Harry collapsed in the chair of his office. Minerva wasn't kidding when she said he had a lot of work to do. He had spent the entire two hours redoing the entire course curriculum. He got none of the other work done. The course wasn't 'bad' per say. Just not advanced enough and focused on things that weren't vital to survival. It barely covered the more unsavory aspects and focused more on the mild and more common uses of dark magic. The spells and objects that could barely be called dark. Harry felt that, if one was to be prepared, then they should be prepared for the most brutal and lethal practitioners of the dark arts, not the mere dabbler.

He understood the hypothesis behind the course plan. If the students didn't know about something then it would die away. Harry disagreed. If a student really wanted to know about the dark arts, they would find a way. They would unearth some old book in the library or get some relic or scroll from an unsavory parent or uncle. Harry remembered what Snape had said in the brief time he taught the subject years ago. The dark arts were like the infamous hydra. Cut off one head and two more would sprout up. The dark arts would never die, nor would dark lords. There would be another Voldemort eventually. The key would be making sure the Wizarding community knew how to fight better and to recognize whatever new darkness that might arise.

Harry reached over his desk and closed the folder that held his notes. He had already set up the black boards and made the plans for the first week. His stomach growled and he glanced at the clock. The students would be heading down the breakfast about now. He guessed putting it off wouldn't do any good so he stood up and



heading out of the office, towards the Great Hall. He was both dreading and relishing Lily's reaction.

He stopped in the shadows by a suit of armor to watch the various groups of students make their way through the door to the Great Hall. He was cleverly using a notice-me-not charm, so no one would think anything unusual if they happened to spot him. After ten or so minutes he spotted Lily, looking ragged and tired with wild wisps of hair poking out. Mark and Juliana weren't looking much better as they trudged into the hall from their meeting with Professor McGonagall.

He moved from his spot and fell in behind them and walked into the Great Hall.

"I can't believe that old McGonagall gave us a months worth of detention." Mark was complaining to his friends. Harry raised a brow. A month was a lot, he would have to speak to her about that.

"I don't want to hear about it any more Mark. I shouldn't have even gotten in trouble. Dad told me to leave the castle after all."

"Oh, shut-up, Lily. You're the one that wanted to go to St. Mungos. We wouldn't have gotten in trouble if you didn't disobey your Dad." Harry was surprised that the normally timid Juliana would lash out at her friend.

"Don't you tell me to shut-up!"

The three of them started to bicker back and forth as they sat at the table. Then, and everyone else in the hall, oblivious to Harry standing there, hushed as Professor McGonagall walked into the Hall and rapped on the podium with her wand.

"You're attention please. I have a few announcements to make before classes begin this morning. yesterday morning Professor Granger's husband was critically injured in his job as an Auror. I am sure the details will be released in today's paper that should be arriving soon. As such she will not be with us for the next several days. When she returns, I ask that everyone to show her the proper respect and not

give her any trouble, nor ask her any inappropriate questions. She is going through a hard time right now and will need all of our support.”

She paused for the wave of whispering to subside.

“In addition I am proud to say that Professor Weasley will be resuming her duties in Transfiguration once she returns.” She paused as a loud groan echoed through the Hall. She almost cracked a smile, but put on a stern face and rapped the podium with her wand once more. When the noise settled down she continued.

“I am also proud to say that we have found a new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. He is well regarded across the world as one of the foremost experts in Defense. His accomplishments have been documented in more books than any other Wizard since Merlin. His grasp of the higher forms of Magic are outstanding and Hogwarts is lucky to have him with us. I am sure everyone here will benefit greatly from his instruction.”

During the speech Harry had moved to the front doors once more and removed his enchantment. McGonagall seemed to have picked up a flare for the dramatic. Harry would have preferred a more subtle entrance.

“I am proud to present to you, your new Defense teacher. Professor Harry Potter!”

Every head turned quickly to the door to see Harry walking down the lines of the tables. A mixture of shouts, cheers, whispers and gasps filled the spacious hall. Among them all though a lone girl with long dark hair stood up and screamed.

“Nooooo!” Lily cried out. Her face was contorted into a wounded and horrified expression. Harry walked right by her and ruffled her hair playfully. The other students darted looks back and forth between Harry and Lily at the outburst.

Lily moved and grabbed the sleeve of his robe and pulled him around to face her. She looked angry now and wasn’t thinking very much.

“You can’t do this to me! Wasn’t last year enough?”

Harry looked around and saw the curious and suspicious stares.

“This isn’t the place, Lily.”

“You’re right! This isn’t the place for you. You can’t take this job!”

Harry had to give it to her; she was very passionate when she needed to be.

“Sit down, Lily. We can talk about this later.” He turned his back to her and started to walk to a disapproving Head-Mistress. Lily, looking absolutely distressed plopped back down on the bench and dropped her head in her hands.

“O’Dowell,” Fergeson snarled from several seats down, “How do you know Harry Potter? Delusions of grandeur now?”

Lily ignored him and just stared at her food, her thoughts a jumble that she couldn’t sort out. Harry gave Minerva a look that told her he would, in no way, make a speech, and took his spot at the table. A few of the other Professors greeted him and he took a moment to shake their hands and thank them for their support. The entire student population, with the exception of the three misfits, were whispering and gesturing towards Harry. He could make out little bits of the standard gossip in the small swirl of chaos and he restrained himself from glaring at Minerva. She got him into this mess. He was going to be spending the entire week deflecting questions and dodging fan girls. Teacher? Bah! He was just a figure head in a school.

He ate his breakfast quickly, wolfing everything down. He met Lily’s eyes only once and grinned at her spiteful glare. He saw that a lot of her house mates were trying to talk to her, no doubt to ask her how she knew him, but she seemed to be ignoring them. Content to focus her energy into trying to glare him out of the job.

His first class of the day was the fourth year Gryffindor and Slytherins. He left breakfast early and hurried to his class. He spent ten minutes

going over his lesson plan and making small adjustments. He looked up as the door opened and two students were staring into the room warily. He had made some serious changes that morning and it was like a whole new room for them. The room was darker now. The bright hangings and pictures of harmless magical creatures had been removed. Now the windows were shut and the place was lit by four spell globes that glowed in the corners. Large portraits were lining the wall, but covered with black cloth. In the back corner a tall rectangular object was hidden by some sort of cloudy obfuscation spell. If one listened closely they might be able to hear a moan, or a scream, breaking past the barriers.

Harry gestured for the students to come in. "Come on in. I won't hurt you. Much."

The students flinched, but stepped into the room, followed by a long line of eager, but cautious kids. They all found their seats and waited in silence. He saw that most of them were staring at his scar and he snapped his fingers to divert their attention to him and not the legacy of his childhood.

"Welcome to forth year DADA. Yes, I am Harry Potter, and yes, I killed Voldemort, and yes I survived the killing curse twice. That's all I will say. I'm here to teach you how to survive, not to tell you stories. Any questions asked had best be related to the subject. I won't answer anything else. Question's so far?"

One daring boy raised his hand and called on him.

"Yes, Mr...."

"Simon Dottingham, Professor. I was just wondering. Why is the room different?"

"Atmosphere. The Dark Arts, and the danger they possess, can't be conveyed accurately with rainbows and cheering charms. The Dark Arts are a life style, and the practitioners of them rarely have yellow and pink curtains and pictures of unicorns and dragons on the walls. Anything else? No? Ok then. Let's begin."

He walked to the front of the class and started to pace across the front row, looking each student in the eye as he passed them.

“The Dark Arts are the nightmares of life. The horrors and pain that man can think of can be found in the magic they give. Death, pain, paralysis, mutilation; Decay, terror, hate, envy. All these things, and more, are the basis behind the Dark Arts. The foundation that fuels their effects. My job is to tell you how to recognize them. Your job is to survive if you come against them.”

Many of the kids shifted in their seats, but couldn't take their eyes from his green. One young girl raised a pale skinny hand.

“Yes, Miss...?”

“Applebee, sir. Why would we have to face them? Didn't you defeat You-Know-Who?”

He raised a brow and gave a wry little smile.

“In History of Magic you will learn that there are hundreds of Dark Lords strewn across the centuries. Of Dark Wizards, there are hundreds more around the world. I won't even get into how many Dark Creatures are roaming around. Facing another up and coming Voldemort is possible. Indeed, the chances of another popping up in your lifetime are high.”

“Do. Not. Dismiss. The fact that you could face what I will be teaching you about this year. It's very real. While they are the stuff of nightmares, they don't live in your dreams. They live in the shady shop keeper. The smiling neighbor. The charming housemate. Your father, your brother, your child, or your friend. You.”

“They can be found anywhere and everywhere. You have to understand and deal with it.”

He looked at each of them again. Everyone was rapt and staring. Harry figured that no one had ever explained the truth about this class. Well, it was time, he figured. They had to know.

“Now, onto the lesson. Can anyone name for me some mild dark curses? Anyone? You haven’t spent four years in Hogwarts without hearing about some nasty piece of work? Anything! That’s either very sad or very hopeful. I’m not sure which. I’ll tell you about one then.”

Harry moved to the blackboard and waved his wand. Some writing scrolled down to reveal a curse, its incantation and the effects.

“Quassento. From the Latin root ‘quasso’. The bone breaking curse. This is one of the most common dark curses out there. The Ministry barely classifies it as dark, but it is. When people think about a broken bone they picture a leg or an arm, maybe a rib. They don’t think about what could happen if this spell hits someone in the chest, in the back or in the neck or head. It’s lethal. It can cave in your skull, break your spine; shatter your sternum right into your heart. It’s easy to cast and easy to stop. A simple shielding charm can stop it.”

“The first and most important spell I will teach you this year. Protego.” He waved his wand and another spell appeared next to Quassento.

“Protego is the first in line of shielding charms. It’s easier to cast than you might think. It can stop minor to moderate hexes and curses. Quassento is stretching its powers a bit, but I assure you; a properly cast shielding charm can stop a lot of spells out there.”

“Everyone partner up. I want two lines one side will cast a minor hex, nothing painful. The other will try to cast the shield spell.”

The chairs scraped along the floor as the students stood and moved the desks away. It took a minute but finally the students were lined up. Harry strode down the center and demonstrated the proper wand movement and the incantation. When he felt the kids were properly informed he stepped away and spent the remainder of the class helping those who were having trouble. By the end of the class more than a third were able to cast the spell somewhat successfully and the rest were close. Harry felt that a little more practice, maybe one more class and they would be able to defend themselves a little better.

The rest of the day until lunch time was much the same. He had a double period with the fifth years after that class and spent the moment going over the basic defense and offensive spells they have learned and made sure they could all cast a stunner, a shielding charm, a silencing hex and a confundus charm. Harry judged that, while slightly behind, they were adequately taught what had been on the former curriculum.

Before heading to the Great Hall he took a moment to floo Hermione at St. Mungos.

"Harry?" she asked when the nurse finally brought her.

"Hi. I just called to see how you were holding up?" His voice was full of concern. Hermione had bags under her eyes and her pretty brown eyes were blood shot from lack of sleep.

"I'm fine, Harry. Just tired. I didn't get much sleep to tell the truth."

"It shows. Ask the nurse for a dreamless sleep. You need to keep up your strength."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't risk it. Ron might need me, or one of the Healers might decide to alter your treatment plan. I've stayed up before. I'll just take some pepper-up potion."

Harry wanted to say otherwise, but he would probably be doing the same if Ginny was in that bed. "Ok," he said after a moment, "Just keep up your strength. You're going to have to deal with the students harping you with questions about me when you get back."

Hermione forced out a chuckle. "Giving you an earful are they?"

"Not really. I scared the first two classes into submission. They were torn between fear of me and awe. It flustered some of them when trying to cast their spell, but we made it through ok."

"It's not nice to bully young kids, Harry," she scolded, but with a tired smile to let him know she really didn't disapprove.

“Speaking of bullying the students, I’ve heard that you’re the worst professor in the school. The students are thinking about dropping out if you go back to teaching Transfiguration.”

Hermione scowled. “They just don’t want to work for their grades. I’ve yet to have anyone in my class not pass their OWLS or NEWTS.”

“Really? Not one D or a T?”

“No. Nothing less than an A. I have the best faculty results in Hogwarts in four hundred years.”

“Wow. I’m not sure I could terrorize them that much though. Anyways I have to get down to lunch. I want to hear the rumors about me.”

“Falling into the pull of fame, Harry?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed, “I just want to head anything off before it starts.”

“Ok. Good luck, and I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“Who said anything about having fun?”

“You did. Your face says it all, Harry. It’s just like the DA. You take pride in seeing people learn to protect themselves. Its cure how animated you seem to be about it all.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged their good-byes and Harry made his way down to the Great Hall for a bite to eat.

As he sat taking a nibble of his food he tried to listen to the muttering of the gathered student population. The fourth and fifth years were both being interrogated about his classes and exaggerating how splendid or scary they were. The biggest topic seemed to be the changes he made to the room and vague wonderings about his adventures and where he had been all this time. A few groups were talking about rumors of his own school extravaganzas though; all of them wildly inaccurate, but any good story needed some embellishments.



Minerva leaned over to speak to him. "You seem to be an instant hit here, Harry."

He shrugged. "For now. Wait till we get to the harder stuff and the homework. I'm sure I'll just become another Professor in a couple of weeks."

"Somehow I doubt that. From what I heard, you taught most of you're first class the shielding charm in one session. If you keep that up, the Ministry will be flooded with qualified Aurors in a couple of years."

Harry choked on his own spit at that thought. "Years?" he managed to gasp out with an incredulous look directed to his former head-of-house. "I never agreed to that."

"Well...we will see what happens at the end of the year. You have awhile to get used to the idea. With the states taking almost every qualified teacher we can find you're the best and brightest that we can hope to have. I never apologized, but I'm sorry that I forced you into this, Harry. I didn't have much choice in the matter. There was no one—simply no one, who would take the job."

"It's ok. I really couldn't keep the shop open every day. With the amount of merchandise I was going through I would have had to close up shop in a week anyways and spend six making more. I've a feeling the Ministry will be buying the recipes of most of my creations anyways. That should give me enough to live on for most of my life."

Minerva looked at him curiously. "What about the money your parents left you?"

"There wasn't much left after six years of schooling and seven years of traveling. It took most of what I had left to start up Perfect Protections. I need a lot of rare components for some of my items and those can get costly. Also I bought that nice little manor house in Hogsmead, all in all it about broke me to be honest. I made enough from my sales to the Ministry though to cover most of my expenses. Then added to what I sold in the two days I went public; well, I made a handsome profit."

"I'm pleased to hear of your success as a business man and wizard, Harry. While I always knew you had great potential I must admit, there were times I despaired of you becoming lost in indecision as to your future."

"Back then I wasn't really sure I had a future, Professor."

"Yes, well...You do and you are making the best of it. I'm very proud to have been your Head-of-House, Harry."

He blushed at the yet another show of affection from the usually stern woman. "You flatter me, Professor."

"Minerva. Call me Minerva."

"You flatter me, Minerva. I'm not anything special. I just have had a run of bad luck followed by good luck."

"There is a saying that luck is nothing more than taking advantage of an opportunity. You do that well. You make your own luck Harry, never doubt your ability."

He was about to reply when he saw Lily sitting at the closest end of the Gryffindor table where the older students usually sat. She was turned and glaring at him with her arms folded across her chest. His words died on his lips as their eyes met, and he gave a small nod, and motioned with his head towards the trophy room off to the side. She returned the nod and stood up abruptly and started walking towards the door. Harry excused himself with Professor McGonagall and fell in beside her. Most of the hall broke out in even more whispering as every eye in the room fell on the two of them. To her credit, Harry saw that she cared not about any possible rumors and was ignoring the attention that had been focused on her all day. A mark of growing maturity in his opinion.

When he closed the door behind him she whirled around and started to tap her foot impatiently. Her anger was every bit as raw as it was this morning.

"Well?" she said tersely.

"Well what?"

She rolled her eyes and blew that troublesome bang out of her face.

"Why are you here?"

"I thought that was obvious. I'm the new DADA teacher."

"No!" she stamped her foot on the stone floor, "You can't teach here. You have to leave!"

Harry moved to a wall and leaned casually against it. "And why do I have to leave?"

"Cause I won't allow you to coddle and smother me. I dealt with it all last year and I won't put up with it again." Her face put on that rebellious pose that he had thought he was drove out of her. He was obviously wrong and wasn't amused one bit.

"Won't allow?" he said quietly and walked over to stare down at her diminutive form. "I think we had this talk once before, young lady. You don't 'demand' anything of me. You are not the parent. I am. I don't know where you get the nerve to talk to me like that. Especially after that stunt you pulled yesterday. Was that not enough punishment for you? Very well. You will have double detention for a month, now. With me."

She gaped at him like he had slapped her. "What? You can't do that!"

"Do you want to make it two?"

She quickly shut up, but her eyes burned with a barely contained insult or three.

"Now to make something else clear. I'm not here to coddle you, smother you, embarrass you, look over your shoulder, or drive you harder than the other students. I'm here because Professor McGonagall was my former head of house and needed me. I owe her more than you could possible understand, Lily. I'm here to teach. You

go on and on all the time about how I never taught you how I do some of the things I do. You have that opportunity now and you're acting like a spoiled brat."

"Now. Here is what you are going to do. Don't roll your eyes at me. Look at me and pay attention. Here is what you're going to do. You're going to go to class like normal, and pay attention and do your work as normal. After classes and in the common room I'm sure you're going to be bombarded by questions. Tell them the truth. That you're my adopted daughter and we hid your name to avoid the attention it would get."

Her obstinate look morphed into a stunned and bewildered expression. "But I thought we said it should remain hidden."

"I did. Now however, I can't deal with trying to keep us a secret. It's easier to come clean and focus on your protection than it would be to try and keep the secret safe. Once people know and it's in the open I can get the Ministry to provide you with some additional security and the professors to keep a closer eye on things."

"I don't need babysitting!"

"Damnit, Lily, It's not babysitting!" he snapped, "It's for your safety, not to cause you any more trouble. Now will you stop giving me lip and just accept the fact that I'm here to stay for awhile? It won't be nearly as bad as you think it will be."

"Oh now? Then why won't you tell me why you're so famous? Why is everyone talking like you're the most amazing person to walk through Hogwarts? All you've ever told me is that you're famous for something you did in the past. It has something to do with the night you found me here, after Papa Severus died. I know it does. I remember everyone cheering your name and talking about you, but I never knew why. Tell me, please?"

Harry sighed and summoned a couple of chairs from across the room. "I guess it's time you know. It's better that you hear it from me than from some fifth year who doesn't know a thing outside of inflated rumors. Sit and I'll explain everything."

And so he did. He told her about Voldemort and how he killed her parents. He told her about how he was the only known survivor of the Killing Curse. She listened raptly and in horror as he explained his life on Privet Drive and the mistreatment at the hands of the Dursleys'. She looked in awe as he told her about his encounters with Voldemort and the resurrection in the Graveyard and she sprang tears at the death of Sirius. She frowned at the prophecy and cringed as he went through his entire hunt for the Horcruxes. When he was finished she was looking down in her lap and wringing her hands together.

"Wow," she said softly, "I never knew you had it so rough."

"I don't like talking about it. I had a lot of help from my friends and I don't like taking all the credit."

She looked to me mulling over something and was biting her lip, as if hesitant to speak up.

"What is it? You know you can ask me anything. I may not tell you everything, but I'll never lie to you."

"I was just thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Well...after hearing about the Dursleys' I guess I don't have it so bad. You're not so bad a father," she whispered; lowering her head to look at the tiny fractures in the old floor.

"Thanks," he drawled, "That is so heart-warming."

He reached over and placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face to look at him. He thought she was a remarkably beautiful young lady, if a bit incorrigible.

"Lily, you can't just expect that the rules don't apply to you. Every one of those adventures I told you about growing up, I paid the price for my rule breaking. I'm not strict on you because I'm following some

parent 101 guide. I know from experience how much trouble and safer it is to follow the rules. I did what I did because, at the time, I had to. They were very abnormal circumstances. They don't apply to you, thank Merlin for that. I love you very much, Lily. You're the center of my life and always will be. It's gonna be fun this year. I promise you."

"You're not going to single me out? Dote on me and make the kids harass me?"

"Of course not. I'll treat you like every other kid in class, but at night, if you want to come down to my room and play some exploding snap with me, you're more than welcome to."

"Really?" Her eyes started to swim with barely contained tears.

"Of course. Come 'ere, munchkin!" he held open his arms and she crawled into his lap and they hugged.

"Daddy?" she asked after a long moment of comforting silence.

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"It's ok, I forgive you."

"Even the detentions?"

He chuckled and kissed her brow. "Even the detentions."

"Thanks. I'll try to be a good student. I promise. I won't cause you any more trouble. I'll be good."

He laughed warmly and tickled her side, causing her to squeal with laughter and pull away. "Don't make promises you can't keep. I'd be too boring if you did everything you're told. Peaceful, yes, but boring."

She tilted away from his arms slightly and gave him a grin. "You're going to regret saying that, Dad."

He groaned.

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He surveyed the seventh years silently, letting them stew for a bit before pulling out his wand.

I know its kind of late to tell you this, but seeing how your entire seventh year curriculum has been changed; Welcome to seventh year Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

He hopped off the top of his desk and gave a lazy wave of his arms, causing the spell globes to burn a bit brighter.

“Before, most of your work was going to be learning the more powerful shields and spells required for your NEWTS. We will be going over those, but it will be rushed. However, you will still be required to learn it all since they will test you on it at the year. Now DADA has a certain calling. Those that have stayed with it after your OWLS should have a certain knock for picking up the curses, jinxes and hexes by now. From what I can tell if you can prepare for your NEWT classes fairly easily then you probably shouldn’t have taken the course anyways. After all, I’ve noticed that when it comes to a cool spell that can knock someone out or blow down a door, students seem to pick it up faster than say, a charm to cause a rain cloud over a garden.”

Some of them chuckled. These weren’t kids. Most of them were of age now and more than ready to embark on the beginnings of their careers. He had to teach them a different way from the fourth and third years. One person raised their hand and he called on them.

“Professor,” they asked, “Could you tell us how you killed You-Know-Who?”

He pursed his lips and grew pensive.

“I should have added that. For this class, questions or discussions about my past that I don’t bring up myself, are taboo. I don’t want to

hear them, nor will I answer them. Any other questions not related to Voldemort or Death-Eaters? Yes?"

"Sir, If you're changing the curriculum, then what will we be learning?"  
A woman with a mob of dirty blond hair asked.

"Good question. This year, we will be focusing on wards, area effect spells, various memory charms and how to undo them. We will also delve into the mysterious art of wand-lore."

"Wand lore?"

"Yes, wand lore. Its time that you all understood exactly what wands are, how they focus your powers, why they interact only with you, while others may hinder your spells. In addition towards the end of the year we will learn the theories and practices behind the molding of your own spells and the altering of current ones. This year will be extremely hard on you. However, I promise you this. Those of you who can pull off an E or better in this class at the end of the year will receive my personal recommendation towards any career you might choose that will involve the use of your defensive skills."

"Like the Auror Program?"

"Yes, like the Auror Program, or the Dark Force Defense League, for those of you who feel the irrational pull towards hunting down rogue Vampires, Dementors and other dangerous dark creatures. There are many paths that your skills could take you and I will endorse them all. Now let's begin."

A few of them chuckled again and he began the lesson. He reached to the table beside him that had a large black cloth covering its contents. He tugged the covering away and tossed it to the floor. On the table were three demonstrations that he had prepared. There were three shimmering circular wards that held an object in each. In one there was a simple quill. In another there was a large rat that kept scurrying about and pressing its dingy pink nose against the invisible wall. In the third was what seemed to be a stunner; held motionless in the air? You could see the bits and pieces of the magic flying off the spell, but nothing seemed to be moving. Everything in



the ward seemed to be suspended. It was a remarkable sight to see raw magic in such a way. The students 'ooohed' and 'ahhhed' appropriately.

"Can anyone tell me what these are? Yes Miss. Turner."

"A quill, a rat and ... something." The rest of the students broke out in chittering and the girl ducked her head and quickly sat down. Harry saved her a little by nodding and smiling.

"My fault. I should be more precise. Yes, a quill, a rat, and ...something. More precise there is a ward over each of these. Can you tell me what the wards do, Miss Turner?" He wanted to give her a chance to redeem herself. It was wasted as the girl blushed and shook her head slightly.

"Anyone else? Mr. Wallace...you have a younger brother in Gryffindor, am I correct?"

"Yes sir, Mark."

"Very well, take a stab."

"Well the one with the quill is a Protection ward of some sort. You can't reach in and take the quill. The one with the rat is an imprisoning ward of some sort. It can't get out. The third...I'm not sure what the third is...Sir!" he added hastily.

Harry gave a small nod, but felt a little disappointed in the class so far.

"Close enough." He wouldn't award points for such a vague and obvious answer.

"The ward around the quill is a Tutaminus Ward. This line a ward is indeed a protection ward. They are used to protect objects, home, and sometimes; people. The effects they can produce are extremely varied. I'm sure you can find one that would do just about anything in some little book or another. From just keeping you away to death, these wards are common-place in the Wizarding world." He looked

around and saw some people nodding. Only the shy Miss. Turner was taking notes.

"I should see everyone in the class taking notes. Ten points Miss Turner." She looked up and blushed again before hiding her face behind her hair. Timid one. The rest of the class was quickly dipping their quills in the ink and scratching on the parchment they had. Harry gave them a moment before continuing.

"The one with the rat is from the Contineos line of wards. These bits of magic are almost exclusively used on people or animals. Rare in the item that can get up and walk on its own to attack someone. Although I do recall being attacked by a desk after a stray spell hit it in charms class." The boys snickered and the girls giggled.

Harry turned around and started to scratch out something on the board. He turned around quickly when he could have sworn he felt a hand on his bum. He rubbed the offended part and looked suspiciously around the class. The faces ranged from amused, to curious, to innocent wonder. He had no idea who had done it. He reluctantly turned back towards the board and finished the writing.

"The third ward you see before you is a Stasis ward. These wards are extremely hard to cast and prepare and can be unstable if not done right. These are best used for magical experiments. To contain or stop wild or uncontrollable magic or their effects. What you see here is just a simple stunning spell held in the thrall of the ward. This year we will go over each of these lines. Learning various types for each and the theories behind them. As far as the stasis ward. The first one of you to successfully cast one by the end of the year will receive a hundred house points, 100 galleons and your choice of either a job in my personal business as an apprentice or a job in the Ministry. I'll speak to Minister Kingsley myself to get you into whatever position you desire." A flurry of hands flew up into the air and Harry was momentarily taken back by the sudden involvement of the class.

"Mr. Clansworth."

"What do you mean as an apprentice in your business sir? You mean you're personal apprentice?"

“Of a sort. I run a business called Perfect Protections. Its purpose is to create and sell magical items to the Ministry and the Wizarding World. For a period of two months over the summer you will work with me in the difficult branch of magic called artifice. These won't be simple charms of glamour on a ring that anyone can do. You will learn and study a great deal of obscure and difficult magic. However, at the end of those two months, you will be equipped for greatness in wherever you decide to go from there. I promise you.”

“Just from casting a spell?” the man asked doubtfully. Harry gave him a malicious little grin.

“A stasis ward is no little spell. There are maybe twenty wizards in all the British Isles that can cast one properly. The chances of any one of you pulling it off are slim. Now end of questions. Time for lots of notes and homework.”

Harry then went into the long and difficult time of dictating the properties and effects and rules governing each of the lines of wards. At the end of the long double period the students trudged out, their writing hands sore, but with looks of excitement on their faces. Harry had no doubt that the subject of the apprenticeship would be of major discussion in the school. He wondered if anyone would be able to pull it off. If so they would be headed for greatness. He was sure.

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“Your father? HA! That's a laugh, O'Dowell. Everyone knows Harry Potter don't have no kids.” Fergeson was sneering doubtfully at her. His vicious denunciation of her claim had many of the other students equally doubtful.

“What wonderful English, Fergeson. Talking like that, it's no wonder you can't even transmute a rock into a stool.”

The boy growled and opened his mouth to say something back, but Lily continued right over him.

“He is my Dad. It was his Phoenix, Sirius, that delivered the note yesterday. I’m not trying to brag or anything, but Dad just thought that it would be better to let everyone know, rather than try to keep it all hushed up. He told me to tell everyone to truth tonight. If you don’t believe me, just ask him yourself. We have his class on Wednesday.” She dared anyone else to counter her or call her a liar again by glaring at everyone. Her house-mates dipped closer to whisper and glance back at her. It was one enterprising young man name Simon that defended Lily. He stepped up behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I believe her. You should to. We’re Gryffindor. We stick by each other through thick and thin. She has my support.”

Lily looked back at him startled and gave a timid, but hopeful smile. Simon was the perfect man. He was a fourth year that all the girls dreamed over. He was handsome, rich, talented and charming. Lily had tried to chat him up a few times, but he never really showed any interest. That he now defended and supported her made her heart soar like an eagle. Her knight in shining armor.

“Thanks, Simon.” she told him happily. He gave her that beautiful smile of his and a wink.

The rest of the house, except for Fergeson of course, voiced their own support of her tale and were giving her their own nods and smiles. For the first time this year she felt like she really belonged to Gryffindor.

Once everyone went off to do their own thing, or had asked her some questions about growing up with the legendary Harry Potter, she was settled in some chairs with Juliana and Mark. They were all chatting away about how great their house was when Simon came up to them and sat next to Lily. She looked started for a moment, and then looked away quickly.

“Thanks again, for sticking up for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did. Like I said, we’re Gryffindor and so are you. What kind of man would I be if I didn’t help a Lady whose honor was being called into question?”

She giggled like a little girl and blushed to the roots of her hair. “I’m no Lady.” she told him.

Mark was looking at her like she had grown a horn and sprouted wings. Juliana was too busy staring hopefully at Simon.

“You’re wrong. You’re a very pretty and kind woman. The house is lucky to have you.” Simon replied.

Lily didn’t think she could blush any deeper, but she somehow defied the laws of physics and almost melted from the heat rushing to her face.

“Listen, I was wondering...well...I’m not really any good at this, but I was wondering if you wanted to go to Hogsmead with me next weekend?”

Lily’s head jerked up and stared at the charming face wide-eyed. Did he really just ask her out? Her? No-body Lily. He was the heart-throb of the younger classes. Why did he want to go out with her? She surprised herself by nodding dumbly and quietly agreeing.

“Oi! She can’t go to Hogsmead with you! She’s a second year! You can’t go to Hogsmead until third!”

Lily glared at her prat of a friend and stomped on his foot.

“Ow!”

“Shut up, Mark.” She turned back towards Simon who was looking rather chilly at her friend.

“I’d love to go to Hogsmead with you.” She told him in a flirtatious voice that she didn’t know she had. Any other time she would have been disgusted with herself. Now she was just happy that she made him smile.

“Awesome! How will you get there though?”

“I’ll find a way. Meet me in Honeydukes?”

“Sure. I’ll see you there. Do you want to sit with me at Breakfast tomorrow?”

“Oh yes! I mean. I’d be happy to.” Gods, she was acting like an idiot.

“Great! I’ll see you tomorrow. I have to get to the Library now. Bye!” He got up and left with his bag without even looking at Mark and Juliana. Lily watched him go with a dreamy expression; her stomach full of butterflies.

“Lils! You can’t meet him in Hogsmead. You just can’t!”

She turned towards him and sent a look he had never seen her give before. Malice and spite.

“You leave me alone Mark Wallace. I’ll do what I want. If you ruin this for me I’ll make your remaining years here hell!”

Mark flinched and looked at Juliana in confusion. She looked concerned as well but gave a small shake of her head.

“I was just saying that your Dad wouldn’t like it.” he muttered. Lily’s anger dropped away and she bit her lip and looked towards the ground.

“He doesn’t have to know...it’s just one Hogsmead trip. I mean, I’d be able to go next year. What’s one more year? Come on Mark, what’s the matter? I’m not asking you guys to go along or get in trouble with me?”

“But what if they ask us where you went? We’d have to lie and then we’d be in trouble all over again.” Juliana spoke up.

"Then don't lie. 'If' they ask you, then tell them the truth and I'll take all the heat. Just let me have this day. What could happen? I snuck out to see a boy on a Hogsmead trip? Lots of kids do it!"

"I'm not so sure about this, Lils. I mean he never gave you the time of day before. He's only asking you out cause your Harry Potter's daughter." Mark, it seemed, had gathered back his courage.

"He is not! He's the best guy in Gryffindor and he asked me out. Me. Stranger, transfer student Lily. Trouble-maker Lily. Don't say that about Simon."

"Jeeze, Lils'. Fine. Do what you want. Like always. What do we know? We're just your friends!"

Mark angrily grabbed his bag and stalked off to his dorm-room. Juliana glared at Lily as well and soon followed after him. Lily sat alone with her thoughts. If she wasn't so angry at Mark for trying to deny her a little fun she would have felt wretched. She did feel a small pang of self loathing, but she figured that would pass tomorrow at breakfast. She still couldn't believe it. Simon asked her out. All the other girls would be so jealous.

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Eric stood in his grandeur robes at the cliff face, looking down at the churning mass far below. The deep cave in the mountains held plenty of room for secrets. He continued to watch the show for a moment and listened to the cadaverous chanting that echoed across the smooth magic carved walls. Lights played across his robes and the smoky countenance of his facial glamour, like a rainbow reflecting off of dancing waters.

He turned as their powerful Leader stepped up next to him.

"You made it back safely. I am pleased."

Eric bowed his head in servitude. "It wasn't hard. The explosion covered my tracks and gave me time to move while the apparition signatures faded away. It was a shame that Auror Weasley pulled through, but we accomplished what we wanted."

"Indeed. They will be after you now. You are the face we need for misdirection. With you we can lure Potter in our current plan fails."

"Current plan sir?"

"Worry not about the details, just rest assured if it works the book will be ours."

Eric nodded and looked back down the cliff face.

"The army has grown impressively. How soon till we can move?"

"We have the numbers now, but we will still need more. We need enough to account for anything Potter might throw at them. From his history he has proven remarkably resourceful. We only have one chance at this. If we fail then we will be set back years. I want four times the numbers here."

"Four times! Reverence, there must be ten thousand down there. Do we have the resources for more?"

"We have enough for hundreds of thousands."

"How long?"

"Next summer."

"I'll need to make some adjustments. I'll no longer be able to move the product like normal."

"We already have the product. We have everything we need."

Eric scowled inside his silver hood. "Then what should I do now? My key position has always been as to acquire product and resources for



whatever needed to be done. My influence in the council will be significantly reduce. What do you need me for then?"

"Indeed. What do I need you for?"

Eric's eyes grew wide and he scrambled for his wand. "No! WAIT!"

"Blackness, deeper than the pitted shadows around them, swallowed Eric O'Soul. A shriek rose and meshed with the rolling sounds of the screams below. The silver robes that graced his powerful form were torn away and in seconds his flesh and bones chaffed from his body to pool into a pile of ash below. A pale skeleton stood swaying for a second before falling apart and clattering to the ground. The leader tucked his wand away into the golden folds and turned towards another figure that had moved from the shadows.

"His resources and money are now yours. Close down all points and pool them into our holdings here. Contact Mr. Malfoy, extend to him a formal invitation to the council."

"Are you sure, Reverence?"

"Positive. He will be yet another nexus in our web."

"The body?"

The leader glanced back at the skeleton.

"Dispose of it." He stepped into a tall shadow and faded away like a fog banished by a breeze. The other mercury clad wizard waved his wand and banished the gory bones over the edge.

Down below, the bones vanished into the churning mass of the Inferni. Decayed and stagnant mouths opened to reveal rotted teeth, and gorged, blackened, tongues. Milky, seeping eyes raised towards the cavern ceiling and a loud moan rose like a tide of promise.

## Chapter 15

### Blood in the Water

The rest of the week went by in a blur for Lily. Her first class with her father was uncomfortable at first, for both of them, but once the classes' questions about the two of them were laid to rest, the lesson was one of the best she had ever had. She always knew her Dad was a remarkable wizard just from watching him work, but she finally got a taste of what he could really be like. He seemed to have some inner sense about Defense that put her previous teacher, back in the states, to shame.

He rattled off a list of the spells they would be studying and how useful they could be. While some of them seemed a little childish, the emphasize he put on the disarming charm and its power quickly got her classmates excited. By the end of the lesson, Harry had them all knocking wands out of each other's hands. Then there was the homework. Never had some an idea been so much fun.

He gave all of them a scenario in a duel, each one different. Their homework was to come up with ten spells that would help them out and how they could use them effectively. Points would be awarded for most creativity. It was one of the best weeks in her life.

Each morning she would sit with Simon at breakfast and they would talk about anything. His friends welcomed her into their group easily and told her all kinds of gossip about the House and the Professors. Mark and Juliana were avoiding her, but that was alright. She wasn't ready to forgive them just yet. Once they saw that Simon was just a good guy who wanted to spent some time with her, they would come around.

She studiously avoided telling, or even hinting, to her father that a boy was courting her and had asked her out. If he ever asked her, she would tell him, but she wouldn't volunteer such news easily. Every other night, before curfew, she would sneak down to this cool room that her Dad had shown her and they would play a game or two of whatever they felt like. She would ask him questions about

Defense class, or magic, and he would give her a few pointers or tell her about an interesting book he knew of.

When the Hogsmead weekend came she was understandably nervous, but everything went fine. She had used that tunnel from the previous weekend to meet up with her beloved to be in Honeydukes. A few of the other students they saw gave her curious looks, but no one said anything. What happened in Hogsmead, stayed in Hogsmead. They spent the day shopping around and having a butter beer in cozy little booth. Nothing really exciting, but he was a gentleman and listened politely to everything she said. She tried to get him to talk about his family, but all he would say was that his Dad worked on making new spells and his mother was dead. That solemn announcement curtailed any further inquiries into that subject. She felt like she was floating on air when she collapsed on her bed later that evening. Yes, life had never been better.

Harry on the other hand had ended his first week on a sour note. After the first day everything had spiraled down hill for him. First there was Ginny. They had made plans to go to dinner, but she canceled them at the last moment. She sounded disappointed, but he couldn't be sure. She said she had an emergency team meeting over something silly, but was bound by contract to attend. They had to reschedule for Sunday. He hoped she wouldn't avoid that one as well.

Then, there were the constant touches that he kept getting in the Hallways or in the Great Hall. He would be walking along when he would suddenly feel the firm grasp of a hand on his bum. When he whirled around to confront the offender he could see no one but students hurrying to their next class or eating their food. It was slowly driving him mad. He knew it had to be one of the seventh years, since it had first happened in that class. Who though, he had no idea.

And last but not least, the end to his miserable week was his last class.

His last class was with the new Goblins that had just started attendance this year. He had forgotten how sour and nasty they could be, even the children. Everything he said, they criticized. Everything

he showed them, they doubted. Everything he told them, they scoffed at. They were so dead set on the idea that he wouldn't give them the same standard of magical education as he did humans, that they were hurting themselves severely.

He was at a loss on how to handle them. If he didn't make it through to them within the next couple weeks, before they fell too far behind, he would be forced to go to their parents and explain the situation with them. That had to be avoided though unless there was no other way.

So when the weekend came he was grateful for the chance to sit back and relax. He was looking forward to spending the weekend with Lily, but he wasn't able to find her that Saturday. He figured she was getting up to mischief with her friends and let her have the weekend to herself.

It was Sunday now and he was just finishing writing up some letters before getting ready for his first real date with Ginny when a knock sounded at his door.

"Come in," he said while putting a wax seal on the envelope.

"Dad?" Lily said when she stepped into the room. She was out of her Hogwarts robes and was wearing some jeans and a baggy maroon tee-shirt with some worn white sneakers.

"Lily! There you are. I was looking for you yesterday. What were you up to?"

"Oh, nothing, just...stuff with my friend."

Harry peaked at her strangely over the rim of his glasses and gave a small frown.

"This 'stuff', wouldn't happen to be with a certain young 'Simon', now would it?"

Lily gasped and looked ashen. "You...You know?" She was dead. He was going to kill her.

“Well it’s kind of hard not to notice when you sit with him every meal and look at him like he was some kind of God.”

Oh, he didn’t know. She was saved! “Oh, well...he’s just a boy.”

“Just a boy?”

“Yeah. Just some boy.”

“I’m not sure, how I feel about this ‘boy’.” He started to tap his fingers on the desk.

“I don’t follow.”

“You’re a little young to be dating, Lily.”

“I’m not dating him!” her voice rose to a high squeak. Harry raised an eye brow and he moved out from behind his desk and towered over her.

“I’ve known you long enough to tell when you’re lying, Lily. Now I don’t mind liking someone and hanging out with him. I don’t mind working on Homework or holding hands in the hallways.”

“But if I find his hands anywhere else besides on yours or if I find out that you two snogged; I promise you, Lily Samantha Potter, I’ll snap you back from him so hard and so fast that you’ll think a tornado just ran over you. Understand?”

“Dad! It’s not like-”

“Do you understand?”

“Yeah. I understand,” she replied sullenly, looking away from him.

“Good. Now I’m happy that you found someone you like. If a bit young. Tell me about him.”

He opened the flood gates with that question. Her sullenness vanished under a torrent of eagerness. She went on and on, gesturing wildly at times, how great and polite and how handsome he was. She insisted that she was in love, much to Harry's chagrin. When she was finished Harry plastered a false, yet sickly smile on his face.

"Well," he started and pushed his glasses up a bit, "he sounds like a wonderful bloke. I hope everything works out."

"You're the one lying now, Dad."

"That's true. I'm not sure how I feel about you declaring your love for a boy when you're only twelve. I'm not even sure how to handle this. You're my little girl. I'm only 24. What do I know about helping a girl with a crush?"

"Oh, Daddy. You're just fine." She crawled into his lap and threw her arms around his neck.

"All you need to do, when I ask you for something, is say 'oh course, Lily. Anything you want' and things will be perfect!"

Harry pulled back and gave her a look. "Oh course, Lily. Anything you want."

They both laughed for a moment before Lily got off him and moved to her own chair.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked.

"Can't do anything tonight, sweetheart. I have plans."

She frowned. "What plans?"

"Well, err. I have a date tonight." He looked at her from the corner of the eyes to gauge her reaction. Lily was speechless.

"What?" when she finally came to her senses, "a date?"

“Yeah.” He shifted in his chair and absently brushed off a few crumbs from his robes.

“OH. MY. GOD!” Harry jumped a bit and was staring at Lily with concern. “An actual date? As in you. With a woman? Alone? Together?”

“I don’t know why you’re acting all surprised.” he grumbled.

“Hold on. Just to be sure. Is this date for romantic purposes? Do you like her? Like kissable like?”

“Lily!” He blushed, but gave her a frown.

“It is! YES! YES! YES!” Lily jumped up on top of the chair and started bouncing up and down thrusting her hands into the air.

“Lily Samantha! Get off that chair this moment.”

She complied and hopped down, but she didn’t lose that exuberant grin.

“Wow! This is great! You’re finally gonna start dating. It’s like an early Christmas present.”

“I don’t know what the big deal is. I’ve had plenty of interest from women.”

Lily snorted and tossed her hair. “Yeah, but you always blow them off because you were pinning over...wait. You’re going out with that Ginny woman you always talk about aren’t you?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes.”

Lily folded her arms and looked at him critically. “You sure she won’t break your heart?”

“If she does it’s only what I deserve. I broke hers first. Now get out of here. I have to get going soon.”

“You’re going in some tattered school robes?” she was aghast.

Harry frowned and looked himself over. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“You can’t take a girl on a first date looking like that! It won’t do. Come on.” She grabbed his hand and started to pull him towards the bedroom.

“Come on, Lily. Is this really necessary? Ginny isn’t the kind of woman to care about a guy’s appearance.”

“Maybe not, but she will care that you took the time to at least look like you care what she thinks of you.” She yanked open his closet and started to rifle through his things.

“Err; I’m not sure I caught that.”

She flashed a brilliant smile over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Dad. I know what I’m talking about. I’m a girl after all.”

Harry resigned himself to the make over that his daughter had planned for him and just sat on the bed watching her. She wouldn’t let it go. His best bet would be to just ride the wave to the end.

Thirty minutes later, dangerously close to being unforgivably late, a disgruntled and nervous Harry stood in front of the mirror. Lily stood behind him with a Cheshire grin as she eyed him up and down.

“Much better,” she told him.

She had thrown him into a rather nice, but simple outfit. He was wearing dark khaki slacks with some brown loafers. The shoes took a bit of tricky transfiguration on his part (she insisted on them being just so). His shirt was a long sleeve button-up of pine green with a slight sheen to the fabric that danced and changed shades in the differences of light. Lily insisted that it brought out the ‘pretty’ green of his eyes. He wore an elegant, but not gaudy, silver watch with tiny green gemstones framing the face, and a matching necklace that had one of his protective amulets perched against his skin. Lily took the



nuances of the simple look to heart and had him open the top three buttons to show the starched white tee-shirt underneath.

Simple, nice, classy. He rather liked it.

"You're right. Much better," he told her and brought her around with an arm around her shoulders.

"You have the look, now you just have to wow her with your charming personality and keen wit," she joked and pinched his side. "I can't help you with that."

"I'm sure I'll think of something. Now off with you. I'm late as it is."

"You're Harry Potter. You're never late. Everyone else is early."

He laughed. "Don't let anyone else hear you say that. I've spent my life keeping my head from exploding. You'll ruin what-ever reputation I have if you start sprouting nonsense like that.

"Bye, Dad. Good luck and have fun. I want details when I get back."

"In your dreams." he said as she walked towards the door.

She looked over her shoulder at him and smirked playfully. "In yours too, I'd guess."

She was out the door when he blushed.

"Well. I guess it's time," he said and walked towards the floo.

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Ginny was a wreck. She was standing in front of the mirror with two dresses held up in front of her and about six more pooled at her feet. For the life of her she couldn't find a dress that she liked.

First she tried a pale yellow sun dress, but it was too chilly outside and the colors weren't in season. Then she tried a deep red outfit with a low cut top, but that clashed horribly with her hair. She thought

about something white, but when she saw it against her skin she threw it away like it was a hot coal. Blue? Nope. Green? She looked like a Christmas tree.

She was finally left with two choices. A black sheer sheath-dress that hugged every curve, but exposed far too much back and cleavage, or a light dinner dress of golden hue that accented her body, but left much to be wondered about to roaming eyes.

“Oh, bollocks. I need to go shopping.”

“Ginny?” she heard Harry’s voice call from the floo area.

“Oh! Shit!” she cried. “He’s too early!”

“I’ll be right there!” she yelled through the door. She looked frantically between the two of them and kept pulling them up in front of her.

“Oh, Merlin, this is gonna be a disaster.” She said and threw away the black skin-hugger and slipped the golden cloth over her skin. She pulled a silver belt, glittered with golden swirls around her waist, and started to fuss with her hair. She fluffed it a bit and let it hang down her shoulders, twisting the ends just a bit to add a slight curl to the tips.

“Well Ginny Weasley, either he’ll run away or jump your bones. Both might be good options at this point.”

She took one last look at her hair and touched it up a bit before flinging a golden shawl around her shoulders and walked into the living room.

“Oh!” she muttered and blinked at Harry. He was...dashing. ‘Who wants to jump who, Ginny?’ she thought as she studied him.

“Wow! Ginny, you look great!” she blushed with pride, but felt a little doubtful at his compliment. She felt like a troll no matter what he said.

“Thanks.” No reason to be rude and doubt his sincerity. “You’re looking pretty scrumptious yourself, stranger. I wonder how I’ll be able to check out other guys with you in my mind all night.”

“Take a nibble anytime you like,” he grinned, “I’ll be your ambrosia.”

She giggled. “Don’t tempt me, Harry.”

“You ready to go?”

“Nope. I didn’t get a kiss from you yet?” She quirked a brow.

Harry stepped closer to her and slowly encircled her waist. Her breathing got shorter and shorter as their lips closed on each other. At the silken touch, a languid ease, born of release and tension, melted away their nerves in an effusion of emotion. This was how it should have been, and hopefully, will always be.

A second, a heartbeat, a tick of time later, his lips left hers and she moaned in yearning; aching for another hair-raising kiss.

“Harry...” she breathed, her voice suddenly husky with want; her eyes lidded and amorous.

“We should go.” he whispered in return; his voice a paradox to his words.

“Screw the date. Take me to bed.”

Harry, with a mountainous amount of will power, stepped back and shook his head. “Gin, we should do this right. I ‘want’ to experience everything that we can. That includes dinners, dancing, apple-tarts and ice cream. Kissing, touching and cherished couch cuddles. I want it all, Ginevra Molly Weasley.”

Ginny placed a hand to her fluttering chest and lowered her eye lids and smiled coyly at him.

“Harry, you’ve become a poet. How’s a girl supposed to keep her wits about her with you saying things like that?”

He reached out and tenderly stroked her flushed cheek.

“How’s a guy supposed to not fall-in-love with you when you’re a dreamscape of perfection and a diamond in the water?”

“Oh that’s so not fair, Harry Potter.” Her voice was nearly inaudible and her eyes wide and shinning. “How can you say things like that-look at me like that; when all I can do is just stand here? I’ve told myself a hundred times not to fall in love with you again too fast. You’re making that damn impossible; you know that?”

He didn’t no what to say to that so he just stood there touching her cheek.

“Let’s go. I’ve got a rather special night planned.”

“...ok. Let’s.”

Harry was right when he told her he planned a special night. She had never had one quiet like it. In the future, when she would feel down or depressed, scared or flirty, she would think of this night with a fondness that would never lose its edge.

He first apperated them to the international port-key exchange. She was unsure of his plans and they spent the time in line with her throwing endless questions and guesses and him giving vague answers and half shrugs.

“Do you wish to purchase a port-key, or do you already have one pre-ordered?” a heavy-set witch in an outlandish robe that had the flags of a hundred countries displayed in flowing flags across her chest, asked.

“I already have on prearranged.” Harry told her politely.

“Name?”

“Harry O’Dowell.”

“One moment.” she checked her list and tapped her wand on a shelf. A moment later a rusty tin can appeared.

“Here you are. One port-key to Sydney, Australia. Please discard the can once you are twenty yards or more away from the arrival point. Thank you for traveling by port-key.”

Ginny looked at Harry with a mixture of excitement and curiosity.

“Sydney?” she asked as he led her to the departure point. He gave a small nod.

“I told you I had a special evening planned for us. Still wanting to spend the night in bed?”

“Oh, Merlin no! Harry how did you know? I’ve always wanted to go there!”

“Hermione told me. I talk to her everyday when I go to check up on Ron. I told her I wanted to take you someplace special for our first date, and she mentioned that you were always fascinate by Sydney. I made a few calls, chucked out a few galleons and v’walla! Sydney, here we come.”

They had arrived in the spacious 2nd floor of a Wizarding inn. The wooden floor was scrubbed and waxed to a glossy amber glow and drapes of lacey white hung at the windows tided back with strips of red velvet.

Harry quickly led her away from the spot and threw the cup into a bin on the other side of the door. They went down a flight of steps into the bustling night patrons of the local Inn. Wizards and witches were crowded around tables and booths and stretched along the smooth wooden bar. Waitresses (an oddity in the Wizarding world) dipped and dived expertly through the meandering crowd to quickly deposit food and drinks to their customers.

Ginny arched an eye-brow when she saw one of the men give a playful slap on the rear of a pretty little blond waitress. To the woman’s credit she scowled at the man and dumped a pitcher on his

head, much to the good cheer of himself and his comrades. She half thought despairingly that Harry intended for them to eat here, but true to his gallantry, he led her through the meandering bodies and into the warm night air.

"Its warm here," she told her date for the evening.

"Well, we are a great deal more south than England is," he told her.

"I know that. I just didn't expect it to be this warm at night. Where are we going by the way?"

"You'll see. Ready for apperation?" He held out his arm. She looked at him suspiciously, but wrapped her own around his. Harry then twisted and pulled them away in the blink of an eye and the rushing pop of wind. When they arrived at their destination Ginny squealed in surprise.

"Harry! You didn't! Oh Merlin, you did!" She threw her arms around him and planted a big wet kiss on his lips.

The soft sound of crashed waves washed with the loud murmuring of the gathering crowd. In front of them was one of the most fantastic sites in the world. Wizard or Muggle.

"Welcome, Ginny, to the Sydney Opera House."

"It's beautiful..."

Her eyes took in the breath taking site. The smooth shell shaped conches that overlapped the concert stages like billowed sails of white steel. The buildings that were lit like a pair of golden pearls in the star speckled night. The reflections that were cast on the rippling black waters that weaved and shifted with the oceanic tides.

She slipped her hand into his and they snuck into the crowd that was slowly entering the concert hall.

"What are we seeing?" she asked him.

“Something called Le Grand Cirque. It’s an acrobatic show.”

“Acrobatic show?”

“Heh, you’ll see. Just remember it’s an all muggle performance, no erm...tricks,” he glanced around the crowd.

Twenty minutes later they were seated in the upper stands next to the stage. Harry had spent a great deal of money to get the closest seats he could to the performance. Ginny was eagerly twisting in her seat and constantly asking him questions after question, which he just shrugged and gave vague answers.

Soft music was playing through the reddish-orange interior. Along the walls and ceiling speakers were pointed in strategic locations. Against the far wall, covering the entire length was the Grand Organ. A monstrosity of musical architecture. Hundreds of tall shining pipes reached towards the roof. It was so massive that it would dwarf a Giant. Easily sixty to seventy feet tall. Ginny and Harry just gaped at the thing, till the lights started to dim and the announcer walked out on the stage.

The stage itself held beams and robes and tall spired poles. Swings and cords that reached down from the ceiling and padded shoots to catch anyone that might fall. Ginny eyed them curiously until the announcer finished and the performers came out.

It was a breath-taking sight for Ginny and Harry. The actors were masterful in their stunts. Men and women flew through the air; twisting, turning, tumbling with an artful grace. Painted and costumed clowns dived from high raised platforms to catch swings, only to flip again and clasp with another swinger. Mixed with it all was a terrific humor and comic stunts that made the crowd roar with laughter at the silly antics.

It was a unique and first time experience for the couple, and both of them were on the edge of their seats through every white-knuckled and heart-stopping maneuver.

Afterwards Harry took them to the House's restaurant. A posh affair of elegance that dripped high society.

"That was amazing," Ginny remarked as they looked over the menu.

"Yeah. I liked the part where they were chasing each other around through the swings. I can't imagine what it must feel like to fly through the air like that with no broom. Must be amazing. The thrill, the ground rush." he just shook his head in wonder.

The waiter came and they made their orders. They went with the baked stuffed chicken and roast lamb, then sat back to chat while they waited for their food.

"So, I haven't met Lily yet." she told him.

"That might be a good thing at this point. She's really developing an attitude. She calms down, then starts up, calms down, and then starts up again. I'm slowly reaching my breaking point."

"I wasn't any different when I was young. I just had brothers to blame it on."

Harry laughed. "Maybe, but with the way things stand at the moment, the stunts she's pulling could be disastrous. She broke several of the wards around out house to let her friends in. What if the council had been watching? Or one of her friends was under Polyjuice? There are things in my home that would be dangerous in the wrong hands. She just can't seem to grasp that sooner or alter, when you take risks, you get burned."

"Sounds like she's a lot like you."

"What?"

"Come on, Harry. You always used to rush head long into things. If you hadn't have had a knack for solving every little problem that came along, who knows what could have happened."



"The situations were different, Ginny." Harry scowled, "I was fighting for my life most the time. I had no choice. I usually approached a professor first, but they either doubted me or moved too slowly."

"Different situations, same thought process. If you want to reign her in, just think of what you needed when you were her age. Information. You needed to know what was going on. Have you told her about the council or the book?"

"I can't do that. It's better if she didn't know. Sometimes knowing can be dangerous."

"But in your case, or her's, not knowing is even more dangerous."

Harry stared into the deep violet swirls of his wine for a moment and took a sip. "I'm not so sure. My concern is that she might blurt out something vital to one of her friends in passing."

"You need to have faith in her, Harry. Like you wanted Dumbledore to have faith in you."

"Maybe you're right. I'll think it over. Right now I have to deal with the problem of a blossoming crush she developed on a certain boy."

"Oh?" Ginny said coyly, "A crush is it? Is he cute?"

"How should I know? I guess he is, if the silly gossip of school girls is anything to go by."

Ginny chuckled. "Poor Harry. Having to protect his daughter's innocence from the vile touches of adolescent young men."

"There better not be any touching or lost innocence or there will be hell to pay," he growled out.

"She won't be a little girl forever."

"I know that, but right now she's twelve and is far too young to start dating. I'm worried about a broken heart more than anything."

"Little girls get their hearts broken every day, Harry. Its how we become big girls and learn to spot the scoundrels' and rogues in later years," she winked.

He frowned. "Since when have you suddenly become a guru on relationships?"

"I'm not!" she defended herself, "I just know what its like to be a little girl with adults hiding things from her and I know what its like having a crush on the most popular boy in school."

He blushed at the reference to their early school years.

"I might be asking you a lot of questions then. 'Cause I don't know a thing about little girls and what they need."

She reached out and took his hand. "Don't belittle yourself. From what I've heard your doing just fine. You're a single Dad with a lot of pressure and responsibilities. Frankly, Mum says that it's amazing how well you've done so far."

"How does she know? She's never even met Lily."

"Hermione. She told us all about the little confrontation at the hospital. She said you handled it very well. Very...mature, were her exact words. You've grown up a lot she said. Very proud, she was."

"Ah...well," he stammered before replying, "I just did the best I could. Nothing really."

"We'll see. I'll judge for myself when I meet her. When will that be, by the way?"

"I was thinking maybe around the Christmas Holidays."

"Why do late?" Ginny frowned.

"Well, I wanted to have some time for...us."

"...Us?" She was slightly confused by his meaning.

“Yeah. Lily and me are a family thing. I want to make sure that this could go someplace beyond the past. I’m worried that Lily might cling to you like a mother figure. She’s done it before with some other women. I don’t want to put you in that position until me and you are in a firmer position.”

“Oh! Harry! That’s-that’s...very thoughtful of you. Thanks, Christmas and snow it is then.” she smiled and raised her glass. They toasted and sat back as their dinner was served.

It was a pleasant and light meal. They stayed away from any further heavy topics and talked about the better things in their lives. They talked about work, friends, family. Little pieces of comedy from their past or trouble they got into after Hogwarts.

Throughout the meal Ginny noticed that Harry studied everything about her. From how she ate, to the way she played with her hair, to the way she gestured while saying something. The intensity of his scrutiny somewhat unnerved her, but in a good way. He was the only one who had ever cared enough to try to know everything about her. The little things and not only the big things.

Harry on the other hand noticed more. He noticed how Ginny would let a slight flush creep into her cheeks when anything sexual was hinted at. He noticed that her eyes got a slight glassy and wistful look whenever a kid or a baby was mentioned. He gathered that having a baby was very important to her. Something that was a must in any future with her.

He saw how she truly laughed at some jokes and just went along with others. He started to develop a better appreciation for her humor and thoughts, just in this one brief hour over dinner. He didn’t know everything yet. No one could in such a brief time. He would though. He promised himself that if she gave him the chance, he’d know every little nuance and thought that crossed that pretty, freckled face of hers.

That same scrutiny let him know when she was ready to go. She kept glancing towards the waiter and the door as if ready to grab the check

and go. Harry hoped it was a good sign and not just that she was ready to part his company. When he spotted the waiter near the kitchen door he gave a small nod when they made eye contact. The professional young man walked over and collected the money and tip from Harry.

“Let’s get out of here.” he said and she smiled with a nod.

He took her arm and led her out the doors and through the hallways of the Opera House. Ginny stopped for a moment to buy a souvenir. Harry insisted on paying, but she would hear nothing of it. They strolled outside, hand in hand, taking closer looks at the small museum and displays of some of the first performances at the Concert Hall. Harry finally pulled them aside into a shadowy alcove and apparated the two of them back towards the Inn. There they picked up a return port-key and fled back to England.

They paused briefly for a drink at the Leaky Cauldron, but when some of the people noticed Harry and her together they had to flee or face the reporters. Ending the night on a somewhat sour note, Harry escorted her back to her apartment.

Ginny wrapped her slim arms around his neck and pulled him down for a lingering, tender kiss. When they pulled apart she stroked his chest softly.

“This was the best date I’ve ever had.” she told him in a hushed whisper.

“I’m glad. I wanted it to be special.”

“It was, Harry. It was. You know,” she absently picked something off his cuff. “It’s not over yet. Do you want to come inside?”

Harry’s emerald orbs seemed to blaze mischievously and a wicked little smile played across his lips.

“Miss Weasley. Are you trying to seduce me?”

“Is it working?”

"I'd have to say, yes."

"Good," she took his hand and opened the door, "'cause I play to win."

The door closed behind them.

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The gathered around the polished marble table and watched as their leader dipped his wand back in the golden threads of his marvelous robes. The body that lay at his feet was banished far off into the darkness, but where wasn't important as it was already dead.

"One last loose end remains. Report," he stated and looked towards his right at a squat figure. A red rune was stitched across the left shoulder. A symbol of his position and duty."

"He is remarkable in his ability to hide from me. I've scoured every hole and hide-out that his kind uses from the Urals to San Juan. He always seems one step ahead of us. I finally ran him to ground in Syria. He is holed up in the Eastern Coven. I could not reach him there. Too large of a force."

The leader leaned back and tapped his long, elegant fingers across the table.

"Do you think Potter got to him?"

"Most likely, Reverence." the council member replied. "Every other contact that was close to us seems to have been sullied by his tampering. It makes sense to assume that D'Arthy was as well."

The gold hood swiveled to a member on his left.

"Thoughts?" the spider asked.

"To say that we are compromised is obvious. We must know the extent however. D'Arthy must be retrieved." his advisor said.

“Are you all in agreement?”

“Yes, Reverence.” The council replied.

“Very well. According to law I must be the one to take action since he was my contact. A serious lapse in judgment on my part, I admit. Prepare a necromantic ritual of binding. I will be back soon.”

“Do you need aid, Reverence?”

“No. I will level the place and pull the worm out kicking and screaming. Have a meal ready for me on my return. I will need it.”

“Yes, Reverence,” they replied again in unison.

The leader stood up and moved towards the liquid shadow in the corner. Stepping in, he pictured his destination in his mind, and with force of will, sleuthed through the paths of shadow towards his destination.

He always loved this method of travel. It was a delicious sight seeing things from the perspective of the shadows. The grey and white cast to the land. The painful burning of the light and the silky darkness of the exit points. Unique from apparation or a port-key. Not as fast as the former and far smoother than the second, he was the only one in existence who had mastered this long forgotten art. Unless that accursed Potter had managed to unearth that bit of knowledge as well. No matter, he would be dealt with once the book was in their hands.

He saw the Coven ahead as he glided quickly through nothingness. A bastion of darkness, surrounded by the searing light of the desert. He passed through the walls and found a nice dark corridor to materialize in.

He checked himself over to make sure he did not inadvertently drag any M'kiri worms through. He had made that mistake once before and the result had forced him to cast the thing into a volcano to kill it. Unfortunately Mt. Everest was unable to withstand the magic used in

its defeat and had erupted. Never give a M'kiri worm the opportunity to bath in the sunlight. One that does quickly grows into a Shadow Dragon. Something akin to a Dragon/Dementor hybrid. A life destroyer on a mass scale that only grows larger and more powerful in the sunlight. A never ending growth of death. No, M'kiri worms were the gravest danger in Shadow stepping.

Once he was sure he was safe, he checked himself over three more time and then proceeded to survey his surroundings. The strength of death and decay almost made him vomit, but with a flick of his wand a soothing smell invaded his nostrils, easing his discomfort. He cast a few more spells, all silently, and discovered that he wasn't even close to the heart, where he had hoped he would be. No matter. He could cave the roof away if needed and let the desert sun do most of his work for him. The only danger was of losing D'Arthy in the process.

He protected himself with a simple charm against physical injury and started down the paths at a brisk step. He began to scour the dusty and unused rooms one by one, pausing a couple of times at some coffins or a stone sarcophagus to seal any latent blood drinkers in.

He moved into the main hallway and started down the wide steps deeper and deeper into the earth. So far in close to ten minutes he had been unchallenged. He knew that would change in a moment however. One of the living did not just walk through an ancient stronghold of vampires without them smelling the blood. He could feel the movements behind the walls and along the ceiling, following his every move. The numbers were less than he imagined it seemed. Only perhaps a hundred. This would be easy.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" an American undead stood guard at the massive doors leading towards the Old-one's chambers.

"A wizard daring to enter uninvited? How brave. How foolish. How...delicious." the creature licks its pale lips.

"I seek the one known as D'Arthy. Give him to me and I will leave you're Coven unmolested. Interfere with me and the results will be most unfortunately for this place."

“Making threats in your position is unadvised spell flinger.” a new voice spoke and stepped out from a shadowed corner.

The obscured golden hood looked in the direction to note it was a beautiful young woman of middle-eastern decent. She obviously had some age on her. A couple hundred years at least.

“My position is one of power,” he told her chillingly, “Do not waste immortality by trying to stop me. D’Arthy or die. Those are your choices.”

She sneered hateful. “Drain him!” she commanded.

The one guarding the door leapt at him and five others dropped from the ceiling. It what seemed like a flurry of golden cloth the Leader spun into action. He jumped backwards and at the same time transfigured on of his falling attackers into a thick wooden stake. He captured it with a levitating charm and fired it like a bullet at the rude guard. When it struck it drove the leaping American backwards into the large door where, in an agonized scream of denial, he powdered.

The other four landed in front of him, where he had been standing a moment before and he blasted them away with a powerful explosive curse. One of them, caught in the small inferno, twisted and writhed as he burnt up in the air to disperse into ash. He sensed the woman, who obviously held some rank, moving at super human speeds to flank him from behind. He would need to deal with her one on one. He slashed his wand across the floor and a wall of flame, from corner to corner, leapt up, keeping her away from him momentarily. That would only keep one such as her at bay for a moment.

The remaining three that had dropped from the ceiling to try and kill him now approached cautiously. One finally bolted through the large double doors to call in reinforcements.

“You should give up now, wizard,” one of the duo told him, “We will flood this hall way soon.”

“Excellent,” he replied blandly, “I won’t have to go to the trouble of searching for you all.”



The pair blinked at each other and burst into movement. The zigzagged their way as they crossed the ground towards him. He pointed his wand towards the floor and tapped his foot quickly. A shadowy mass, of snarls and fangs rose up. It had no definition, no form and it needed none. A set of jaws, if you could call them such, rushed, snake like, through the air and caught the one coming in on his left in the vise like grip. His other attacked thought him vulnerable and came in at his right only to rebound off the shimmer wards that kept him from harm. The Leader casually slashed horizontally with his wand and a head rolled away to disintegrate a second later.

He walked over to the last Vampire that was struggling futilely in the grasp of the shadow demon. He gave the mental command and a shower of blood splashed against the torch lit wall. The last body faded away.

“You will pay for that, mortal.”

He turned around to see that the powerful woman had gotten past his wall of flame.

“I will pay for many things one day, madam. But I doubt I will pay for the destruction of a few children. You can easily replace them. You however won’t be so easily replaced. D’Arthy. Give him to me.”

“He is under blood pact. We will not violate the ancient traditions for you, Wizard.” she spat.

“Then you will all die this day.” he replied with a shrug.

She glared at him for a moment and summoned up her powers. She started fade away into a heavy fog and the Leader made his move. A hurricane like gale smashed into the half-woman/half-fog, interrupted her concentration and ruining the change. She gasped and looked down at herself. The parts of her that had been changed were dispelled by the winds. She was missing great chunks of her body, including her chest. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her mouth lolled into a silent scream. Fire burst from her eyes, nose, mouth and

nails. In seconds the skin burnt away, then the bones, till she collapsed into yet another pile of ash on the ground.

“Pity,” was all he said and turned back towards the large double doors.

With a probing spell he saw that roughly fifty of their number was waiting for him beyond the doors. Ready to attack once he came through. He couldn't allow that. He smiled grimly behind the undulating mask of magic that guarded his face. With a small bit of magic he peaked open the large doors. For such a massive metal object they were amazing silent, nothing but a whisper of sound. Impressive.

He felt the horde tense on the other side and pointed his wand through the crack.

“Advosolis!” he yelled in a loud and firm voice. He needed to make this spell as strong as possible.

A burning ball of sunlight erupted from the tip and shot off into the room. A half a second later a thundering detonation of sunlight streamed through the cracks of the door and a chaos of screams and shrieks played like music to his aged ears. He hummed a bit to the tune of agony until the light and the sounds died away. He then pushed open the door and coughed at the dust filled air.

He waved his wand and banished the ash that floated around him till the room was cleared out and only lit that the masses of torches along the walls and the candled chandeliers that were strung from the ceiling. He pointed towards three of the torches and they lifted away from their metal confines to hover over his head. Weapons at the ready in case anything else tried to attack him.

He lightly treaded down the steps with the soft patter of his sandaled feet. He walked up towards a large throne where one creature still remained, nursing its burnt skin as it drank from a comatose young woman. The woman in its jaws jerked once and was tossed away. The Leader watched curiously as the blacked skin peeled away and

fell in flakes towards the ground and new creamy skin encased the creature.

Finally, a stunning model of stone cold beauty ran a hand through her long, luxurious, raven black hair and over her heaving breasts and nude body. Her cloths had been burnt away when her skin caught on fire.

“Mortal.” Her voice was a soft crooning sound that sent shivers of delight along his wrinkled spine. A voice of promise. A voice of sensuality that stirred the lions of even his aged body in such a way that he hadn’t felt in decades.

“You have hurt me. Many things I can forgive and ignore. An assault upon me I can not.”

“My deepest apologies ancient one. I checked before hand to see if you were in attendance, but you were hidden from me. Had I known you were here I would have chosen a different method. It was not my intention to harm you.”

Indeed he would have sent something far nastier to kill her/it. Whatever you wanted to call a creature that old.

“Intentions do not matter. Actions do.” She rose up slowly and languidly. Every movement a play in sexuality and desire.

“I pray that we do not have to battle Ancient-One. I only came for one named D’Arthy, who you are holding. I asked for his return and was denied. He had betrayed his word to me and my comrades. I seek justice for this slight in honor.”

“What does one such as I care for the honor of mortals? D’Arthy is my childe. His immortality is far for important than the machinations of a pathetic cult that has been too long in dying.”

He pursed his withered lips. “I see then, Great Lady, that he has even told you about us. I guess it’s decided then.”

“Oh, Yesssss,” she dragged the word out and bared her long viperfish fangs. “You’re blood shall be as ambrosia for us. Your death will be long in coming.”

He readied his wand. “A pity. I hate having to slay such a fine specimen. Rest assured I will remember you for centuries hence; once my own immortality is complete.”

Her ravishing visage smiled condescendingly and then she vanished from his sight. As quick as he could he flicked his wand and a wall of force radiated outward from him. Her blurred body struck against the powerful magic and battled for a moment before she broke through, barely paused by the strength of his spell. The pause was all he needed and he took the opportunity to hit her with a slowing jinx. With her speed reduced he would be able to keep up with her now; barely. She still moved almost too fast for the eye to follow.

She closed in on him and laid her hands on him. A burning current raised up her arms as she broke past his wards with pure strength. She hissed in pain and backhanded him away. He tumbled through the air, unhurt, and stopped just before he hit the wall to hover an inch or so over the ground. The old one was inspecting her hands and arm for any damage before she looked back at him.

“Impressive, wizard. Very impressive. I did not think there were any single magic users that could content with me anymore.”

He said nothing, but used the time to renew his personal wards and strengthen them with a bit of additional nastiness should she touch him again. She snarled at him and raised her head in a highly pitched scream that almost made him drop his wand and cover his ears. Her skin seemed to shiver as something moved underneath.

“Tut-tut,” he said to himself as a massive pair of leathery bat-like wings sprouted from her back, “You’re playing your hand too early; you’ve lost your edge in your vanity.”

It was a soft whisper, but he knew she could hear him. From the corner of his eye he saw his target looking on from an alcove. D’Arthy. In similar nodules all over the place other pale faces were watching

the battle with interest. If he could defeat the Coven-Master then any ties D'Arthy would have for protection would vanish and none would challenge his right to the vampire anymore.

In the glance he almost died however as she moved across the space diving them with one great flap of her wings and tried to decapitate him with her dagger-like claws. He hit her with a banishing hex and she flew away from him before wheeling around in the air towards the vaulted ceiling. She perched on one of the chandeliers and watched with ruby red eyes. He wondered what her next play was till he heard the chittering of the rodents.

Rats. Hordes of them came up from the sewer plates on the ground and soon swarmed the entire floor. Thousands of them. He rolled his eyes at the display. Typical. No ingenuity in any of the really ancient monsters. They always tended to grow predictable and redundant. Like there was some book that they followed whenever challenged. No matter. He knew just the thing for the vermin.

He made a show of yawning and pointed his wand towards the ground. A heavy thick mist creped out and blackened like some rotted flesh. More and more seeped along the ground and he stoked it quickly till it covered the ground for meters all around him. The rats ran forward with their endless numbers, but the corrosive gas quickly chewed and ate away at their skin. He looked up towards the old one and tilted his head.

"One last chances my Lady. Hand over D'Arthy or die. One childe is not worth the loss of your immortality."

She screamed and plunged down on him like a falcon. The three torches that still floated above his head shot out and clubbed her wings hard. The sudden impact twisted her decent and she spiraled past him to smash into the dark, fog covered ground. He pointed towards a wall and with a sharp word pulverized the stone into pile of fist sized rocks. While the ancient regained her feet and fled to nurse her wounds and heal her skin from the acidic properties of his spell, he ran his wand over the pile and transfigured them all into small wooden stakes. With another gentle caress of his magic the hundreds of wooden darts rose into the air and waited his command.

When she hurled herself at him again he sent the small army of weapons forth to do battle. They shot through her at blinding speeds and halted her flight as she shuddered with each impact. Like a fallen angel she fell to the ground, once more into the poisonous mist. He watched and waited as she rose up again, but unable to fly. At her age a simple stakes or twenty couldn't kill her. Indeed few things could, which is what made them so deadly. He knew a little trick to stop the really ancient ones though. The ones that had been around for a thousand years or more.

"Your death...will be long and painful, whelp," she hissed. Her voice no long sultry and pleasant.

"As I said. A pity." An arch of grayish spell fire connected with her wooden riddled body. She screeched like a banshee and tried to stalk towards him, only to find her steps growing sluggish and heavy. She glanced down and screamed her fury as she spotted her legs hardening. Slowly the spell crept upwards as he held the spell on her. Harder and harder she tried to move or break away from the magic, but to no avail.

Almost a full minute later she stood silently in the battle trod room. He ended the acid fog at his feet and walked towards the once ancient Vampire. Now a petrified statue forever more. The bones of the legion of rats crunched under his feet as he inspected the thing. He stared into the dull unblinking eyes before tapping the head lightly. The statue fell apart in a fine sprinkle of powdered marble.

"And another one bites the dust." he chuckled at his own pun.

He looked around to see that all the other dark creatures had fled, including his wayward contact.

"Accio D'Arthy." He said calmly and waited. Second later a hurtling body thudded to the ground at his feet. The leader quickly conjured spell chains of a soft lavender hue around the traitor as it begged and cried pitifully.

"Please...please. He made me. He made me. Don't kill me. Don't"

“Silence,” he ordered coldly. D’Arthy shut up instantly.

“So. You betray us and then run away. The least you could have done, to gain some reprieve and perhaps your life, would have been to inform us instantly. Instead you make us waste valuable time hunting you down. Time that is being sorely tested of late. We know that where a determined mind is, the chance to defy that mind is slim to none. Had you told us of the problem we would have been angry, but understood and fixed the breach. You would have lived, but would have been severed from us with heavy oaths of bindings.”

He walked towards the heavy thrown in the center of the carnage and sat down, the prisoner being dragged along the ground behind him.

“So,” he continued, “The question now is, what have you said and to whom.”

“It-It was Harry Potter, Lord Irium. He made me. He used powerful magic to force the answers from me.”

A pregnant silence permeated the dank, death filled air.

“How do you know my name?” Irium asked in an infuriated and worried whisper. His hands clutching impulsively at his rune-etched golden robes. D’Arthy hesitated.

“Tell me!” he screamed out with fury.

“You’re son! I found out from your son!”

Irium sat back stunned. It was impossible. The possible seeds to his downfall had gone so far back? Decades?

“What did you tell Potter?”

“Everything...he made me tell him everything.” D’Arthy answered in a defeated tone.

Irium stood and screeched in fury before blasting away the corpse of the young human woman in his anger. He then rounded on D'Arthy and paced back and forth, thinking hard. He knew he was supposed to bring the traitor back to the council. He was the Head Priest, but the laws were clear. If they found out that they had been infiltrated so thoroughly, or that he had told the most precious of secrets to his own son, they would terminate him quickly and ruthlessly. He was a tyrant with the rules and laws, but not so much that he would forfeit his own life for them. For the first time in thousands of years the Council of Phyre was poised on the brink of its destiny. In the chronicles of history it would be him that had led them to it. He would be heralded as the greatest, the most powerful. The harbinger of their glory. He wouldn't allow it to be another member. He couldn't.

He looked over the fear-filled form of the traitorous vampire.

"Tell me all you know and I won't leave you to the sun. I will give you a clean death of mortality."

The creature's words poured forth delivering every devastating piece of information that through him, Potter now knew.

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Irium returned via a series of apparition points. He was too distraught to try shadow-stepping. He risked losing his way and being devoured by some of the more unwholesome denizens as he had done that.

As ordered, the council had prepared a decent meal for him on his return.

"We are in trouble," he said as he sat back down at the head of the table.

"Where is D'Arthy, Reverence?"

"Potter showed up and destroyed the wayward contact before I could finish questioning him."



“Potter?!”, “Did you kill him?”, “Did you get the book?”, “Are you injured?”, “How is this possible?” a bunch of voices overlapped each other, sending him into a spiraling head-ache.

“Silence!” he commanded and the cavern quieted down.

“In answer to your questions; He had a charm on D’Arthy that informed him when he was captured. He showed up and killed the prisoner before I could subdue him. He then fled via an emergency port-key. I did not have time to take proper action.”

“That D’Arthy is dead is not important. What he knew of us and revealed to Potter is.”

“And what would that be, Reverence?” The deceitfully docile tone of his advisor asked quietly and suspiciously.

“He knows of three more of us beyond Eric O’Soule. He also knows of a dozen business fronts that we have used in order to prepare our army of Inferni. It is very possible that he is taking steps to counter it.”

“Can he? Does he have the knowledge or power to stop that part of our plan?”

“Doubtful, but it is a possibility that we dare not overlook. The upside to this disaster is that Potter is not expecting the numbers we will have amassed by then. He will be too overwhelmed to stop the entire country from falling to the hordes of undead. Remember, the army itself will boost its own numbers from the muggle population.”

“What should we do?”

“Quietly and quickly we shall reinvest in other areas. A shifting of roles and responsibility is needed to counter Potter’s network of information. Some of you may find yourself with decidedly less wealth than before. I apologize, but our goal is above all. We must reorganize to safeguard what we have left.”

“And you, Reverence?” his advisor said smoothly. “Your little bird brought this down on us. Will you step aside for new leadership?”

“Are you challenging me, Sebastian?”

“Of course not, Reverence. I was just-”

“Because if you were, or anyone else here. I think you will find that I am more than capable of meeting it.”

“Of course, Reverence. My apologies for any insult.”

“It is not an insult,” Irium lied and waved it away, “It is the nature of our operation. None of you would be effective, or part of the Council, if you were not ambitious and intelligent.”

They silenced while he ate his meal to regain his strength. He pondered his friend Sebastian’s words careful while he took bite after bite. It was troubling that his advisor had so quickly become suspicious. He would need to look into it further and keep an eye out for any duplicity. When he was finished he turned towards his friend.

“Make reports on everyone’s’ investments, businesses and duties. Then draw up a plan for reassignment. Try to insure than no one is too critically hampered from their former positions of influence and wealth. It needs to be done as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Reverence,” Sebastian replied with a small bow.

“Caleb, help him out. He will need your keen and analytical mind for this.”

“Yes, Lord Irium.”

He reached up and past the gossamer clouds of gloom that covered his identity and pinched the bridge of his nose. When they all departed he walked towards the cliff face and stared down into the lethal mass of Inferni that waited hundreds of feet below.

The game grew ever more dangerous. He and Potter seemed destined to battle. First though, he would have the battle the council if they even smelled blood in the water. Anyone of them would give up

everything they owned to gain his position. Indeed it was required to. He had nothing, yet everything. He had the entire resources of the council at his disposal, yet nothing of personal value. It was the balance to his position.

A pitiful moan echoed up to him from stone valley.

Blood in the water indeed.

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A/N - There you have it. The mysterious Leader revealed at last. I hope you understand that he is a serious practitioner of magic and not another Draco that is more bark than bite. Irium can bite. Oh can he bite, I promise you that. Nothing on the Dumbledore or Voldemort scale, but he could make them blink twice if needed.

-I've gotten some PMs about my spells and where I get the words from. The answer to this is; Everywhere. J.K.R. used a multitude of ancient or dead languages for her spells. Derivatives from Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and Germanic. (not German, but Germanic - like in the Germanic tribes and hordes pre-roman domination.) I take bites and pieces of the words and what they mean and construct a spell with the desired results. Or rather I decide what the spell does and morph the words around the effect.

I hope that answers that question. Like always feel free to PM me about anything you don't understand or are confused about. I will attempt to clarify.

till next time.

## Chapter 16

### The Battle of DADA

“Honestly guys! You’ve been doing so well. Why is everyone having trouble with this one?” Harry addressed his cadre of second year students in confusion.

“Focus your mind, your will. Give a sharp downward flick of the wand and say ‘stupefy’. Try again.”

Lily and the rest of the class grumbled and took position for what seemed like the hundredth time in the double DADA class. She and several others were covertly glancing at the old clock; counting down the minutes until dismissal. Again the dozens of students cried out the incantation and again the class was rewarded with just a few sputtering red sparks from their wands. Over an hour at it and no one had been able to cast the spell yet.

“Again.” Harry said with pursed lips.

“Da-Professor Potter, sir?” Lily raised her hand.

“Yes, Lily?” he answered.

“Isn’t this a spell taught in year four? Maybe our magic isn’t strong enough to cast it yet?”

“Not strong enough to cast it yet? You sound like your magic is some kind of battery that gets stronger with age. Is that what you lot think?” he looked around suspiciously. He was greeted with a few shrugs and nods.

“Honestly. Whatever gave you all that idea? Magic doesn’t work like that.”

Most of his class glanced around in confusion again and Harry shook his head and motioned for them all to gather around his desk. Once they had all wandered over and stood before him he began his little sub-lesson on magic.

“Now regardless of what you’ve all heard or thought; Magic is not some cauldron inside you that fills the more you get older. Magic just ‘is’. A three year old can perform an accidental stunning spell just as effective as I can. You can’t exhaust it or ‘run out’. The difference between that toddler and me is focus and control. You’re all at Hogwarts to learn how to control your magic. To direct it how you want. This spell is a simple spell and not beyond any of you. If a first year can do it, so can you.”

“A firstie cast this spell?” one of the kids asked incredulously.

“The entire Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff houses did.” Harry lied. He hadn’t even informed them of the stunning spell nor did he have any intention to.

“Sir?” Lily butted in, “If we all have the same amount of Magic growing up as we do when we are little then how come some spells are stronger than others?” she was trying to grasp at the concept, but was failing miserably.

“Good questions. First; there’s no ‘amount’, to be had. Like I said. Magic just is. You can ask a spell that can level a mountain a thousand times a day and could keep casting it a thousand times more. Although no such spell exists, thank Merlin.” he added as an after thought.

“Now in answer to your question; the reason some spells are stronger than others is due to how well it is cast. Not some imaginary pool that you draw from. The more concentration you have and the more magic you summon the better your spell will perform. For example.”

He turned to one of the unused desks and banished it with a haphazard flick of his wand. It flew across the room quickly and thudded into the wall, rattling for a moment on the floor when it landed.

“That was a poorly focused and lazy banishing spell. You’ll be learning that in third year. This is focuses and properly executed banish.”

He pursed his lips and blocked out everything else except his intention and meticulously squished his wand with every ounce of will power he could muster. A second desk flashed through the air like a bullet and shattered against the solid stones. A few students jumped and gave a cry of surprise as pieces of the desk flew around and the remains settled in different corners of the room.

“So you see,” he resumed once the kids got over their awed silence, “Will power and focus is the key to any spell.”

“Professor? I’m trying so hard; really I am! I’m concentrating so much that I’ve got a head-ache, but I still can’t cast the spell. If what you say is try then how come none of us can get anything but a few sparks?” Marc, Lily’s friend’ told him.

“When I said you’re here to learn control I meant it. Your mind is a muscle. We start you all with the easiest spells and gradually build up as you move from year to year. We build up your mental strength so you can cast harder and harder magic as you get older. If we set you in front of a muggle weight set and load it up with 200 pounds, you wouldn’t be able to budge it. If we gave you fifty pounds and then gradually increased it every month or so, you’d hit the two hundred mark a lot faster than you would other wise. Understand?”

“What’s a weight set?”

Harry sighed.

“All right, look at it this way. Consider this. The stunning charm is a level 4 spell. There are no real ‘levels’ per say, but I’ll just assign one based on difficulty. The stunner is a level 4 spell. Last week you all got down the body bind pretty easily. That’s a level 3 spell. So now I’m asking you to pass the next level. You blew through level 3. Level 4 shouldn’t be too hard now should it?”

“Oh! I get it.” Lily said in sudden comprehension. Harry gave a subtle roll of his eyes. He knew she would. Her and those damn muggle video games that she was introduced to in the states. Worse than Dudley she was, honestly.

“I’m glad someone understands.”

The bell rang and the students, with faces of relief and glee, fled to their bags and tried to burst out of the room. Harry cast a locking charm at the door and the frontal set of bodies got smushed in the mad dash. That just happened to be Lily.

“I didn’t dismiss you yet.”

They all groaned.

“Don’t give me that. Homework. Practice the stunner. Those of you who can cast it for me next week don’t have to turn in an essay. Those of you who can’t. Give me one foot of parchment on what you think is holding you back. That’s all. Have a good meal.”

He let them out and started to fold up his things to go down to lunch.

“I’m disappointed in you, Harry. Is that all the homework you give out?”

He spun around and grinned widely at the exhausted face inside his office door way.

“Hermione!” He rushed over and pulled her into a hug; giving her a brief spin through the air.

“Ha-Harry!” she battered his shoulder till he set her down.

“Sorry, Hermione. It’s just good to see you outside the Hospital,” he apologized.

“Thanks, but I’m not a top.”

He laughed. “Is everything ok with Ron?” Seven weeks had passed since that awful incident and it was about time for Ron to wake up.

“The healers say his brain activity has returned to normal. They’re going to wake him up tomorrow. I came by to ask if you wanted to be there?”

“I course I do. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll talk to Minerva and get my classes canceled for the day. The kids’ll like that.”

“I’m sure they will.” she smiled gently and then massaged her tired eyes.

“Ginny’s back at the house. We normally have lunch together. Wanna pop on over with me to grab a bite to eat?”

“I would like that, Harry. Thank you.”

“How’s Rose?” he asked about their adorable two year old, almost three now.

“Molly’s still watching her. I let her come see Ron once, but she just kept poking him and holding out her arms for him to pick her up. She doesn’t really understand what’s going on. She just misses her father.”

“My guess is she misses her Mum too.” he said insightfully, earning a withered smile.

“I know, but I can’t bring myself to stay away.”

Harry gave a knowing nod and took her gently by the arm and led her to his office floo. There they traveled through the twisting and streaking network and stepped into his house in Hogsmead.

“Gin?” he called out once he took Hermione’s robe from her and draped them over a chair.

“In the kitchen.” a cheery voice called back and a moment later poked her head around the corner.

“Hey, Hermione. Is everything alright with Ron?” her face became set with a mask of worry.



Hermione waved it off and found that happy smile that had been missing for months now.

"Their going to wake him up tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Ginny asked in astonishment and tilted her head slightly to let Harry give her a peck on the cheek as he brushed past her. "The Healers didn't tell me that. I visit every night. How come they didn't mention anything to me?"

Hermione shrugged with what little energy she had left. "I'm not the Healers Ginny. They might not have come to that determination until today."

"I'll be right back. Have to cancel some plans." Ginny hurried out of the room.

They moved into the kitchen and Harry placed the bowl of French onion soup and honeyed bread in front of Hermione before pouring himself a helping.

"So you mentioned something about homework?" he brought up her little remark from before.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes," She took a nibble and a sip of soup, "A one foot essay if they can't cast the spell? Isn't that a little light for a stunning charm? What about theory, practical uses, and where it originated at? The root language the incantation is derived from? There is more to a spell than its simple casting, Harry."

"Why? The theory I can understand, but the rest? What does that have to do with learning to control magic or casting a spell? Does knowing what wizard supposedly invented a spell somehow make it easier to cast? Not likely."

"Harry, it's an institution of learning. The students are expected to know these things for the OWLS and NEWTS."

“Hermione, I’ve seen the OWLS and NEWTS. The root language and its origins aren’t required. Hell the examiners probably don’t even know that. Look, I’m cramming them full of spells and techniques that’ll help them survive if they ever run into a spot of trouble. I want them focusing on the important stuff, not trivialities. If they want to know every little detail of a body-bind they are welcome to research it on their own free time.”

“It’s not a boot-camp, Harry. I’m just saying that you can’t base your entire course on wand work alone.”

“I’m not. We studied the theory behind stunners the previous week. I didn’t assign them homework because we reviewed it all in class.”

“Homework helps a student to memorize-” Hermione began, but Harry cut her off.

“Wand work helps to build up mental strength, will power and lets your magic become more familiar with the spell the more you cast it. Writing for hours on a parchment doesn’t do any of that. Go ask any Auror who survived the war how to cast a wind wall charm and they’ll tell you in a heart beat. Ask them the theory behind it and they’d just scoff and say your bonkers for even worrying about it.”

“Theory only helps you up until the first cast,” he continued, “After that it’s all out the window. I do things hands on Hermione. Your classes may have the best grades, but mine are going to be the best magic users.”

Hermione pursed her lips and gave an impertinent little toss of her hair. “Grades reflect the caster.”

“Hermione, give it a rest, will you?” he said in exasperation.

“Oh very well.” she waved the subject away and took a drink of the hot tea that Kreacher put in front of her.

“Thanks.”

“Just one last thing,” she added.

Harry groaned. "What?"

"You should teach them the concussion curse. It's slightly easier to cast and has the same properties as the stunning spell. It should help them get through whatever block they have."

"Hmm. You know? That might be just the thing. Thanks! I'll try it out."

Hermione nodded just as Ginny walked around the corner.

"What might be 'just the thing'?" she asked before pouring herself some lunch and taking a seat across from Harry.

"I was just giving Harry some pointers for his classes. Some of his students are having trouble with a spell that's a little too advanced for them."

"Still having trouble with the stunner?" Ginny asked knowingly.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "Nothing but sparks and headaches."

"They'll get it," she reached across and patted his hand, "Just give 'em some time. Remember, it's about two years too early for them still. You should assign them some homework on the theory though."

Harry groaned as Hermione gave a triumphant smirk.

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The seventh years were separated into their own work-benches with a partner as Harry walked around to observe their progress. After close to two months only three of the twenty-three students had managed to produce any type of advanced ward at all. None had even come close to the stasis-ward that would earn them instant greatness and fame.

"A little more of a twist in the wand there, Ashton," he corrected one of them, "You're close though."

At the moment they were all working on a permanent anti-apperation ward. One that, when applied, would protect an area forever unless brought down by an outside force. There were loads of jinxes and spells that could temporarily stop apperation in an area, but those all faded within an hour or two. What he had them working on was akin to something Hogwarts had for protection. Indeed, that was Harry's plan. By the end of the year every student would be able to reinforce almost every ward and protection that Hogwarts had to offer.

Harry gave a few more pointers to a couple of his charges before walking back towards his desk at the front of the room. Right when he was about to sit down he felt that mysterious and intrusive hand on his bum yet again. He quickly swatted his hand down attempting to feel it connect with something, anything, but for the hundredth time he felt nothing but air. It was someone in the class. He was sure it was. The seventh years were the only class in which he felt the touch. The rest of the time it happened in the hallways or at the table in the Great Hall. The only problem was that he couldn't really say something about it out loud without looking like a fool, or giving someone else the idea as well and adding to the annoyance.

Ginny found it a riot. She would constantly nag him about his phantom molester. Poking fun about how it was just, 'too delightful a bum not to touch'. Then proceed to cast her own version of the spell and send him ducking out of the room with a blush and a curse.

He sat down carefully and looked around the room carefully for the perpetrator. Every face, every hand, and every wand however, was diligently at work on the assignment. He couldn't even hazard a guess at who it was. He assumed, hoped actually, that it was one of the girls. If it was one of the boys, well...he didn't want to think about that idea too much. There would be a great deal of awkwardness if it was.

"Oi!" he jumped to his feet as he felt the hand grabbed something else entirely besides his rear. The class jumped as the silence was broken and looked towards their perturbed and flustered Professor.

“Now that’s just going too far! The next time one of you lot touches me, I’ll give the whole class detention for a month until one of you fesses up!”

They looked around at each other in confusion before the timid Miss. Turner spoke up. “But, Professor. No one touched you. We were all on the other side of the class.”

“Don’t gimme’ that! I know your tricks, whoever you are. I’m fed up with it!”

The class flinched and started to shrug and whisper to one another. Harry suddenly jumped back and swiped his wand down as yet another mysterious hand groped him.

“Blimey! Professor Potter’s gone bonkers...” Ashton said with a kind of nervous wonder.

“Perhaps we should go get the nurse?” One of the young women said with worry.

“I’m not crazy!” Harry said and flared his wand for a third time as the hand touched him yet again. “Bloody Hell! Enough’s enough!”

He waved his wand in a circle over his head and a strong gust of wind flashed through the room almost bowling the students over. No invisibility cloak flapped away to reveal a hidden person. He did, however, detect a soft giggle from the far corner of the room. An empty corner. He narrowed his eyes.

“Finite Incantantum.” He said with a strong voice. The air in the corner seemed to blur and resist the cancelation charm, but his focus was too strong and the blur became more pronounced until the person seemed to melt into view.

“Ginny!” he stared in astonishment. “What the bloody hell?”

“Umm, hi?” She gave a shy smile and a little wave.

The class was darting their heads back and forth at the two; trying to decipher what exactly had been going on.

“Gin-I-Wha-Why?” he stammered out, flushed and embarrassed.

“Sorry, Harry. I came by to see how your first day went and I couldn’t resist. It just became a kind of game after that.” She gave a half-hearted shrug in apology, but Harry could see the corners of her mouth fighting against a laugh.

“Well. I guess I should introduce you lot. Class, this is Ginny Weasley. Winner of the Grand Merlin Maze and my girl-friend.”

Ginny leaned against the wall and gave the group a lazy little wave of her pale hand. Her eyes never left Harry’s wand, which was twitching and eager for a bit of retaliation.

“Class is dismissed early,” he told the flabbergasted collection of motley magic users.

“No-no-no! You lot can stay right here. I need witnesses! He can’t do anything to me if you guys are around to see it!”

“You can all leave. Now.”

“The first one of you lot to hit the door gets turned into a cow.” Ginny started to inch her way towards the safety that the said door promised.

“I’ll tell you what class,” he suddenly turned and put on his most charming smile and devious face he could. “Ginny here isn’t a member of the staff. Nor is she an invited guest. She’s an intruder. 10 points to each of you that hits her with a tickling charm.”

“No!” Ginny ran towards the door, but just reached the handle when over ten charms slammed into her. She shuddered for a moment and then started to laugh uproariously and fell to the floor clutching her sides and squirming around in a fetal position.

“Sto-Stop!” she cried out in laughter.

Harry calmly walked over and knelt down to study her as she fell into hysterics. He grinned down at the devil of a prankster and tapped his wand in the palm of his hand.

"You ok down there, luv? You look a little peaked," he said with a cheerful little smile.

"The-The-A Kiss for whoever turns Potter into a toad!" she finally gushed out with a force of breath before succumbing to the fit of giggles again.

"Ha! Like that'll work! They know that casting..." his voice trailed off as he turned around to see that every boy in the room had an eager face and a ready wand aimed at his direction.

"Crap," was all he got out before finding himself leaping away from the blaze of transfiguration spells.

He rolled behind his desk and threw up a shielding charm. He was fully into the game and the fun by now, and had a grin as wide as the London Bridge across his face.

"Hey! Come on now fellas! Can't we talk about this?"

"Sorry, Professor. You're great and all," Ashton called out, "But a kiss from a maiden in distress is worth the detention."

"It's treason then! Girls! To me! A kiss to whom-ever defends me from this vile army!" He heard a pattering of feet and the girls of the class flocked to his side of the room and stood in a line. The lot of them almost laughing; clearly having a great deal of fun. In the mean time one of the guys canceled the tickling charms on Ginny and she crawled to her feet breathing heavily.

"That attack was unseemly of thee Sir Potter. My knights have come to defend mine honor against the cruel injustice of thy tyranny!" she sang out in archaic English.

“Thou honor is lacking, Lady Weasley, in thy pusillanimous use of subterfuge to lay thy wand, most unseemly, upon my body,” he replied. Still hidden behind the fortress of his desk.

“The Challenge has been called and accepted, craven Wizard! Show thy face in battle, or be cried for craven among thou peers and hounded till death with thy villainous nature!”

“I’ll not be called craven by the likes of thee, foul temptress! Face my army and flee for thy life! Thou time is up! Charge!” he cried out and spearheaded the attack against Ginny and her gallant defenders.

The class room rang out in a flurry of spell work and early year jinxes.

Minutes later Harry and four of his remaining girls were huddled inside a tiny conjured fort. Ginny, and her overwhelming men, had piled the desks and other furniture into a formidable wall.

“Professor Potter...” Turner began.

“Stay in character, Ashley. It’s King Potter.” he corrected with a wink.

She giggled a bit, but smiled at the response. “Your Majesty, Lady Weasley and her forces are entrenched behind a wall. What are your orders? We’re outnumbered.”

“Hmm,” Harry stroked an imaginary beard, “We must drive the vermin out from hiding. The men are emboldened by the beauty of the Lady. If we remove her from the fight they should fall to the Light.”

“How do we do that Prof-Your Majesty?” Lira Singmore asked.

“I don’t know.” Harry said with a miserable shrug. He took a glance over the wall and ducked back as a few hexes were sent his way.

“Close one...” he muttered and frowned in thought.

“Is she afraid of anything?” Turner asked timidly and unsure of herself.



“Hmm? Oh! Great idea Ashley!” he said with a malicious little twinkle to his eye, “Not sure if she still is...but this just might work.”

He carved a little hole out of the conjured wall and took aim with his wand. ‘Blimey, but she’s gonna get me when she gets me alone,’ he thought as he sent several spells through the opening. He turned back towards his faithful four and made a gesture.

“Get ready,” he told them, “She should come screaming out soon.”

“What did you do?” the third and forth girl asked.

“Rats. She hates rats.”

True to his word a shriek sounded through the crowded class room and the wall of desks tumbled down and Ginny jumped through like she was escaping a fire.

“Now!” Harry cried and the five of them ran out of the fort, spells blazing.

Ginny ducked down to avoid the first wave and three of the guys got peppered with boil curses and body binds. Ginny struggled to avenge her lieutenants’, so to speak, but Harry took careful aim and slammed a disarming charm into her. He deftly caught the slender wand in his free hand and leveled them both at his irritated girlfriend.

“Victory is ours!” he said in a loud and triumphant voice just as the door to the classroom slammed open.

“HARRY JAMES POTTER! WHAT ON EARTH, IS GOING ON HERE?!” McGonagall thundered to the suddenly chastised group. Her hands were on her hips and she had a furious look on her face.

“Ah-Ah-Professor McGonagall...” Harry reverted to formality for salvations sake, “We didn’t expect you here.” He gulped.

The wizened old Headmaster surveyed the room with a critical eye and carefully noted the fallen students. Some stunned, some bound and some even transfigured.

"You-You-Duels! Between students! In a classroom for Merlin's sake! What were you thinking?"

"Well you see it all started when Ginny groped me and then insulted my honor. Naturally, as any chivalrous King would, I had to defend my name-"

"I did no such thing!" Ginny interrupted, "You insulted my honor first!"

Harry waved her off, ignoring what she said which earned him a glare. "-and she gathered her forces to assault my Kingdom. These fair maidens of battle flocked to my side to defend me against the vile intrusion of the wily witch. The lines were drawn and the war declared!"

Harry thought it was a very elegant explanation, but saw that Minerva was finding no humor in the mock battle.

"Detention Mr. Potter!" she said sternly.

"What?!" his jaw dropped, "I'm a member of the staff! You can't do that!"

"Bet me," she said grimly and took out her wand, "You will report to Severus's Portrait at once and do whatever he instructs. Have I made myself clear?"

Harry felt like a first year again under the stern eye of his Head of House. It felt even worse for the fact that she had called him out in front of his class, who happened to be smirking a bit at the display. He nodded mutinously and pocketed his wand and handed Ginny's back. He noticed the smirk on her face and couldn't resist sticking out his tongue at her. She opened her mouth in an incredulous 'O' before mouthing 'I'll get you back' to him silently. He rolled his eyes and went to gather up his things when the Head-mistress left.

"All right you lot. It was fun while it lasted. Get everyone sorted out and put the class back in order."

"Aren't you going to help, Professor? You started it!" one of the boys, with a limp asked angrily.

Harry hooked a thumb towards his disheveled red head girl-friend. "Actually she started it. Teacher's prerogative. I make a mess and I can order you all to clean it up. If I've got to suffer a detention with a mat of paint, you lot have to spend a few minutes cleaning up."

"Is she gonna help?" asked another of the girls. Ginny arched a brow and looked at him expectantly.

"Ha! You should see her flat. Fat chance you have getting her to clean up anything."

"Harry James Potter!" Ginny looked outraged.

"What? You know its true." he gave a bewildered look.

She strode over to him and pulled him down by the collar to whisper harshly in his ear. "So I hate cleaning! You don't have to shout it out to the whole school!"

"Then don't go chasing me around and pinching my bum in public." he grinned back.

She blushed and looked at some imaginary object across the room. "That's beside the point."

"If you say so." He lowered his voice more and let that 'twinkle' fall into his eye, "Let's discuss it over dinner. My place? I can set up a nice bath. Get some chocolate and champagne? Sound Good?"

"Mmmm!" her resistance melted at the idea, "That sounds like a blast! At 8?"

"See ya then Red," his little nickname for her that she seemed to hate.

Ginny walked to the door and looked back over her shoulder.

“Good-bye my Harry-poo-poo-poo-bear!” she sang out in a little sing song voice. He blushed and looked around to the chittering and snickering faces of his students.

“If I hear one word about that name outside this class...” he warned with a glare. They just broke down into gales of laughter and Harry just shook his head and left them to their work.

He walked, or stomped, up towards Minerva’s office and snapped out the password. When he walked through the door he was stopped by the small crowd already there. Minerva was sitting at her desk with Minister Shacklebot and Thicknesse in some chairs. Their heads turned to regard him and he gave each a solemn nod.

“Minister...Pius. This is a surprise.”

“Indeed, Harry. Indeed. We’ve been waiting for you.” Kingsley said with a crooked little smile.

“Why do I get the feeling the detention was staged?” he asked Minerva who was watching the little exchange.

“Oh I assure you, Harry. I’m very serious about the detention. It was just a convenient excuse to take you out of the class for a moment.”

“Why does it not surprise me that Potter landed himself in detention yet again?” a snide voice drawled from the wall. Harry just sneered over at the unwholesome portrait.

“Silence, Severus,” Minerva chided it, “Harry, The Minister and Mr. Thicknesse need to discuss something with you. I hope you don’t mind that I attend as they assure me that the safety of the school is at stake.”

Harry raised a brow and gave a small nod. He pulled himself a chair and took a seat. Then waited.

“I’m sorry to bother you about this, Harry,” Kingsley began, “but we need your advice about something.”

Harry frowned and scratched his head thoughtfully. "I'm not sure how much help I could give, sir. I tinker with magical objects and that's about it. I don't know much more outside of that."

"I think you're too modest about your abilities, Harry. You have to have an astounding grasp of Magic in order to create the items you do. That's beside the point though. It just so happens, the reason we are here happens to pertain to your area of expertise."

"Artificing? I don't understand. Do you need more recipes?"

"No Harry. We need you to create something for us. Recreate actually. We need the Table of Madrek. The original was stolen during the preparations for the Maze. We believe the Council, you told us about, is smuggling in contraband to make Inferni."

"And how would the Table help you?" Harry knew they had Inferni, but felt it prudent not to reveal too much at the moment.

Kingsley's brow furrow for a moment. "The table is an old object that was uncovered from Voldemort's lair. It allows for the tracking of dark creatures. With it we could trace a horde of undead and learn where the Council is operating from."

"I wish I could help you, but I haven't the faintest clue of how to make something like that," he lied, "Anyways I don't think it would help in the way you're thinking."

Pius and Kingsley looked a little crestfallen and sagged a bit in their chairs. Harry and Minerva met stares and she nodded. The old Headmistress excused herself and left the grand office to attend some business.

"That table," Harry continued once she was gone, "doesn't work like you think it does. It only allows you to track what doesn't want to be hidden. The council has so many spells and protections around their base that the table would pick up nothing. Absolutely nothing. In fact I think it's a safe bet that if you tried to force it to locate the Inferni, the table might actually get damaged." He was pretty sure about that since the remnants were in his workshop, slowly being repaired.

Kingsley banged his hand against the arm of his chair and swore. Pius wore an identical look of anger. The Minister got up and paced back and forth. The commotion awoke the large portrait of the former Headmaster though.

“Gentlemen, Harry. What seems to be the problem Kingsley? I dare say you look like you could use a glass of Ogden’s finest.”

“Albus,” the Minister looked on the painting with a faint hope. “We need your help. We think the Council is prepping an army of undead to attack the Ministry or Hogwarts. Every lead we have runs up dry. Every scout we send comes back with his memory erased. We have to find them before they begin to move. Any ideas?”

“I’m afraid I have not a clue on how to aid your plight my old friend. Perhaps all you need is a little, shall we say, elbow grease and an evasive bit of intuition.”

“I’m not sure I follow...”

“Follow the bodies my good man! Follow the bodies.”

Kingsley still looked a little confused and Harry clarified for the stressed out Minister. “I think what Dumbledore means is to check the graveyards. Lock down every large graveyard you can find. They need corpses for the Inferni. So deny them.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Thicknesse spoke up for the first time. He was slapping his head like an idiot and Harry was tempted to aid him in the self punishment.

“Thank you; both of you.” Kingsley told Harry and the Portrait. “Maybe we can catch them in action.”

“It’s no problem.” Harry said. “Anything for the Ministry. Was there anything else?”

“As a matter of fact; a couple things.” Kingsley turned his chair to face Harry and took a seat again. “The Goblins are starting to grumble

about the school. They're saying they aren't being taught along the same standard as the rest of the students. Do you know anything about that?"

Harry scoffed and folded his arms. "Rubbish! They get the same coursework and homework as the rest of the students. They refuse to believe that I'm not holding back with them. They criticize and doubt every word that comes out of my mouth."

"Are the rest of the professors doing the same?"

"As far as I know. Look, the Goblins seem to have a natural grasp of how magic works. It seems to be too easy for them. They might be basing that on the belief that they aren't getting a proper education"

Kingsley's brow furrowed again. "How do you mean?"

Harry thoughtfully paused to formulate his words. "Goblins work hard and strive for difficulty and excellence. They embrace a challenge like it's a slight to their honor. They pound and pounce on any difficulty. So here they come, thinking wand magic is a new challenge and they find out that it's relatively easy for them. So they start to shrug off the easy stuff and want to move right into the hard stuff."

"Could we do that? Will it hurt them?"

"Of course it would. Goblins are new to the use of wand magic. Minerva's trying to set up a strong foundation for the future. Give the first students coming into Hogwarts a strong base to build their society off of. She wants to see experimenters, Aurors, Healers and geniuses come out of the school. A full integration between the two cultures. If we pack them up and have them take the NEWT tests in five years, they could probably all get at least E's, but that's all you'll see. Average and above average Goblin wizards. Nothing spectacular."

"We don't want that and neither do the Goblins. They just don't understand that we teach things a certain way for a reason. Hogwarts and the Ministry worked hard to set up their curriculum. If they insist on an accelerated class, then we can accommodate. It would ruin

relations down the road and I can just see the Goblins up in arms when you can't give them jobs and positions in the Ministry because they aren't qualified."

Kingsley digested his words with small nods. "I see your point. It'll be another war. Only this time they'll have wands."

"Exactly. That or you'll have to give them the jobs anyways and that would reduce the quality of the Ministry. Either way its better to make them take the full seven years than push 'em through."

"Excellent, Harry. Good insight there." Harry nodded his thanks for the compliment.

"Now onto the last reason I'm here. I've heard you're trying to teach your seventh years' stasis wards. Have any of them succeeded?"

Harry laughed. "Oh no you don't. I get first dibbs on whoever gets that one down. The Ministry can have sloppy seconds."

Pius frowned and joined the conversation. "Harry, the Ministry can offer them far more than a home shop in Hogsmead. They could be Unspeakables, Dept. of Experimental Charms and Spells, Dept. of Magical Catastrophes. You name it we could find the best place for them."

"And stunt their growth," Harry said firmly. "They might pick up a few tricks here or there, but the Ministry barely offers further education outside what they need in the department. I can offer them a lot more than a mound of paperwork and night-time tinkering with unknown objects in dark rooms. I can give them the opportunity to be great."

"They might not come work for us then, Harry." Kingsley said insightfully.

"Maybe, maybe not. That's up to them and what you can offer. You'll just have to pay them more. Anyways it's all in the air at the moment. Not a single one of them have managed anything beyond the crudest of wards yet. I doubt any of them could pull it off by the end of the year."



“We’ll see, Harry. We’ll see.” Kingsley nodded to Thicknesse and they stood up.

They all shook hands and moved towards the floo. Before stepping through the Minister turned back towards Harry one last time.

“Harry, about the Council...” he asked.

“Yeah?”

“Are you ready for them if they come early?”

Harry looked out the window into the slowly dwindling daylight. “I don’t know...Merlin help me; I don’t know.”

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“And then Professor Potter sent a bunch of rats behind our desks. Ginny screamed and ran out like the wind and before you know it she was flat on her bum and the Professor had her wand. Then old McGonagall came in and ruined everything.”

Lily listened enviously as the seventh years described the mock battle in DADA for the third time. It was the talk of the school. Everyone was suddenly itching for a duel with anyone. It got their blood moving and their wand hands twitching. Especially the boys.

“He never does that kind of stuff with us.” Lily grumbled to Simon who was reading a book with his arm around her shoulders.

“Probably not,” he replied regretfully. “That kind of stuff is probably saved for fifth year and up.”

She frowned at her boyfriend. “You sure know how to make a girl feel better!”

"I try," he grinned playfully at her. She swatted his arm and leaned into his embrace to look at the text he was reading.

"Robert Cialdini? Who's that?" she asked curiously as the title was covered with his hand.

"Oh, nobody," he said evasively and slipped it into his bag on the floor. "Just some muggle doctor."

"Oh...why are you reading-?"

"Hey, do you want to go flying around the Quidditch pitch?" he interrupted and her eyes lit up with excitement.

"Oh! I haven't flown since summer! I'd love to!" she said and quickly packed up her bag. She hesitated and looked over to the other side of the common room where Mark and Juliana were working on homework. She turned to Simon who was also putting his things away.

"Do you think we can ask if Mark and Juliana want to come?" she asked timidly. She knew he didn't get along with them after she told him what they said.

Simon bit his lip and looked between her and the pair. "If it would make you happy, sure. I don't want to hear about them bad mouthing me though. Honestly, Lil's," he used Marks nickname for her, "They treated you bad. It's great of you and all; to want to forgive them, but only if they agree not to try and turn you against me. Deal?"

She smiled at him. That was why she knew he really liked her. He never forced her into anything. He always gave her the choice and never spoke badly about anyone. He was the love of her life.

"Thanks!" she reached up and kissed him on the cheek, he tried to turn his head in time to catch her lips, but she was smart enough not to go there, and still marked him in the proper spot. They both pretended like he didn't do that and she walked over to her friends.

Mark and Juliana looked up suspiciously when they saw her standing in front of them, but didn't say anything. They waited for her.

"Umm," she timidly began, "I'm going flying down at the Pitch and I wanted to know if you guys wanted to come along. You know. Try to mend the fence, so to speak?" She fluttered her hands together and looked back and forth at them hopefully.

"Is Simon gonna be there?" Mark asked and looked past to the fourth year who was watching the interaction.

"Well, yeah. I was hoping we could all go together."

"Then, no. I don't want to go." he dismissed the idea and went back to his parchment and quill.

"Is it so bad? Me having another friend; is it really that bad that you don't want to be mine anymore?" Lily felt close to tears that they were being like this. Why couldn't they understand?

Juliana looked crestfallen and was about to give in until Mark placed a hand over hers and shook his head a bit. She blushed and refused to meet Lily's eyes.

"He's not a friend, Lils," Mark dove in again quietly. "He's just using you and I don't want to be a part of that. He's gonna end up hurting you. You made your choice weeks ago. Him or us. You chose him."

"You made me choose!" she implored in a devastated voice. "If you were really my friends you wouldn't have said those awful things about someone I liked. You would have supported me."

"Lily," Juliana spoke up quietly; against Mark's advice, "You said some pretty bad things too. And it isn't about you being his friend. It's about you getting into trouble and dragging us along. Everyone knows he's making you break a lot of rules. Sooner or later you're gonna get caught, and you're gonna take the fall. Not him."

"Fine," Lily snapped. "I can see it's no use trying to make up with you two or apologizing. I never should have even come over."

Mark gulped and looked her in the eye. "I guess not..." he whispered.

Lily took another look at each of them and sagged back to Simon, heartbroken.

"No good huh?" he said knowingly and put a hand on her shoulder. She just shook her head and wiped an angry tear from her eye.

"They keep saying you're trying to use me. They just don't want me to be friends with anyone else."

"I see...Well, go get ready and I'll meet you on the pitch, ok?"

Lily nodded and went up the stairs to girl's dorm. Simon watched her leave and then looked over to Mark and Juliana who were whispering to one another. He ground his teeth and strode over to the arguing pair and folded his hands across his chest.

"You two have a lot of nerve; you know that?" he said angrily. His voice drew the attention of about half the common room.

"It's none of your business, Dottingham."

"She's my girlfriend so I'd say that makes it my business. What? You don't like me so you turn her away? Is that what you call friendship? Is that what being a Gryffindor is all about?"

"So I suppose using her to get all buddy buddy with Professor Potter is being a Gryffindor? Sounds Slytherin to me."

"You're not too bright are you? If I wanted to cozy up and earn points with Harry Potter, I'd do it in the class room. With him. Not by dating his daughter, which from what she told me, he's none too happy about."

Mark stood up and looked up at the forth year. "You can play the protective boy-friend all you want, but I see right through you. Why else would the most popular forth year date a second year? You're up to no good and I'll find out why. I won't let you hurt her."

"I'm not going to hurt her you prat. If anyone's doing the hurting it's you and you girlfriend there. In case you haven't noticed you two are about the only people she call's friends. Why, I haven't the foggiest."

Mark went for his wand, but Juliana held his hand back.

"I think you should go before Lily comes down, Simon." she told her in an un-Juliana-like tone. It was still quiet, but strong and without the usual shyness. They all glared at one another before Simon left the common room to head down to the pitch. A minute later Lily trudged down the stairs. She took a moment to look at her two friends wistfully. She paused a second and opened her mouth. She must have thought better of it and just left without voicing her thought.

"I don't get her, Jules'," Mark said to her. "Why can't she see what he is? A snake in lions clothing. Hissing in her ear to get her to do this and that. Bound to land her in trouble, or worse. She's being so stubborn about it."

"We aren't helping things either you know," she told him. "Why don't we just apologize to her and watch out for her?"

"What? Apologize to her? She owes us an apology. She's gotten us into trouble loads of times, gotten us a hairs-length away from expulsion, and then has the nerve to insult us when we tell her she's gotten get into even more trouble? I won't do it. I absolutely won't do it."

Juliana sighed and went back to her homework. Or tried.

"You're right, you know." Fergeson said, stepping out of the corner where he was hidden in the shadows.

"What's that Ferrgy?" Mark was fast losing all control by the stream of unwanted visitors. Fergeson narrowed his eyes a bit, but amazingly shrugged it away.

"I said you're right. About Dottingham. He's up to no good."

“And what would you know about it?”

“I just know.” he shrugged absently and looked towards the small tunnel that lead into the Master Stairwell.

“Yeah? Well, buzz off.”

Juliana rolled her eyes and kicked him under the table. He winced and turned to glare at her. One that she matched.

“What Mark meant to say was; why do you care about Lily? You’re rotten to her.” she asked the boy.

“She’s rotten right back. Coming into Hogwarts and putting the school down cause it doesn’t look as new at her United States one. Or how about she’s had something to say about every single Professor? The simple fact is, she’s insulted almost everything in Britain. Well I love Hogwarts. I love my country. I don’t appreciate it when a spoiled snob talks crap about ‘em.”

“So now you’re just turning over a new leaf? All is forgiven?” Mark asked in a sarcastic voice.

“Merlin, you are a prat. You need to listen more. If you’re in a bad mood, don’t take it out on me. Go make up with Potter and become that warm guy we all liked-kinda.”

“Fergeson,” she put her hand on Mark’s to stop him from saying anything, “Could you get to the point please?”

“Fine. I’m just saying that Dottingham was right about one thing. Gryffindor is supposed to look out for one another. He’s not. He’s breaking the code. I don’t like her. Prolly never will. But that don’t change the fact that I want her to be mopping around her with a broken heart for the next five years, does it?”

“So what are you suggesting?” Juliana asked.

“Go to Potter. Tell her good Ol’ Dad.”

"She'd never forgive us!" she brought her hand to her mouth in horror at the thought. Mark nodded in agreement and shook his head.

"He's not likely to believe us over his own kid now would he?"

"I'm not so sure," Fergeson said. "I think he would. He's a right cool bloke. The best there is even. Never a better wizard's come out of this school than Harry Potter," his voice took on a sort of reverent quality. "He'll believe you when you say that Dottingham is up to no good."

"Blimey, Fergeson! You sound like you're in love," Mark laughed a bit and cocked his head. "Potter's a hero and all, but that doesn't make him-"

"He's more than a hero!" Fergeson took an angry step forward. "He saved my Dad's life once. During the battle of Hogwarts. He's not a newspaper article to me. He kept my family together! So I know he's the best."

Mark and Juliana stared at one another in shock. It was easy to forget at times that Harry Potter was a hero for a reason. Easy to forget that the stories were more fact than exaggeration. Still, they both thought it was too soon.

"Not yet..." Mark said at last. "We can try to find out on our own. I think if we go to Potter, he'll believe us, but we'll lose Lily for good. She'll hate us forever. I don't want that, do you Jule's?"

"No," she shook her head, "Not at all."

"Fine then. She's your friend. I tried to warn you and help you. On your head's- so be it." Fergeson shrugged and turned away.

"Wait!" Juliana halted him and he looked over his shoulder. "Thanks for caring about her. I know it couldn't of been easy to say that stuff."

Fergeson looked at her a moment and then just shrugged and walked up the stairs to his dorm, one of his friends following up behind.

“Well? What should we do about Simon and Lily?” Juliana asked the brooding Mark softly.

His eyes darted toward the stairs again. “We need to get into his dorm and look for anything suspicious.”

She gasped and looked around the room wildly for a moment at the other kids. She scooted her chair over closer to his and leaned in to conspire.

“You gotta be kidding. We could get into serious trouble if we’re caught.”

A flash of annoyance crossed his face before he answered. “I know, but it’s like they said. Gryffindor’s look out for one another. Maybe it’s time we start looking out for Lily. We find out what Simon’s up to and prove to Lily what a rotten guy he is.”

“I don’t know...” she was uneasy about the idea. Something seemed off to her.

“Well I do. Tomorrow during lunch. We’ll go then, ok? It’s the perfect time. No one’ll be around.”

Juliana sighed and gave up the argument. This night was going from bad to worse.

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For Lily, however, the night was going from bad to great. They met up at the pitch equipment shed and grabbed a couple of old Nimbus brooms to ride. Once they bundled up against the early winter chill they took off into the air. They turned and twisted and dove around the goal posts and soared past the rebuilt wing of the castle. He chased her through the hoops and she almost crashed him into the stands. Their flying wasn’t up to Quidditch level, but was still smooth and elegant. Being the only daughter of Harry Potter, she more than knew her way around a broom and it showed.



“Ok! Stop, I give up!” Simon laughed and came to a stop some hundred feet in the middle of the playing field. She smirked and glided over to him and pulled up slightly to hover beside him.

“If there is one thing I’m good at, it’s flying.” she told him with confidence.

“I can tell. After the third time you almost plowed me I figured you had me beat.”

“Maybe you should have paid more attention to the ground and less on me.” she smirked.

“Where’d you learn to fly like that anyways? You might be able to make the team.”

“Nah. I don’t like the game, just the flying; and my dad taught me.”

“I heard he was pretty good.” He scooted a little closer to her.

She readjusted her pony tail and looked up at the moon.

“He was on the House team since his first year here. They say he was one of the best Hogwarts has ever seen. Tied for third for the most snitch catches. He would have got first but he said there were a couple of years he couldn’t play.”

“Tell me about yourself. You don’t talk about your childhood much.”

“I’m still in my childhood, silly,” she giggled.

“You know what I mean.”

She sighed and leaned forward to rest her head on the tops of her hands over the broom handle. In the quiet night air she pulled herself back to the past.

“I was adopted. Twice. I don’t know anything about my biological parents, but Papa Severus adopted me when I was four. Then the war happened I guess. I don’t know too much about it, I just found out

a couple months ago that there was even one and that Severus was involved somehow. Well the war ended and Papa Severus died. I remember the battle a little bit. He told me to stay up in my room while he went to do some things.”

Her eyes grew glassy while she recounted the time.

“I stayed up there for hours. I was pretty scared. I could feel the castle shake and heard explosions all over the place. Every now and then a small fight would break out outside the room I was in. I finally fell asleep in a closet and when I woke up Papa still hadn’t come back. I got worried so I crept out of the room. I finally found a big party in the Great Hall. I didn’t know what else to do and no one could tell me about Severus so I just sat at a table and cried. I was alone.”

Her voice was a little sad, but her face brightened wistfully all of a sudden.

“And then ‘he’ found me.”

“He?”

“Professor Potter, my Dad. He just sat down next to me and asked me what was wrong. It was all sort of a blur after that, but he took me out of the Hall and the next thing I know I woke up in a room and he wanted to be my new Dad.”

“Wow, he was pretty young back then.”

“Yeah, but he was the best! He was the only one who paid attention to me. Saw how scared I was. I didn’t know he was a hero until recently. Can you imagine? Here he was. A Hero. Everyone wanted to congratulate him and he just ignored them all and sat down with me. No one else. Me.” She smiled in remembrance.

“You love him.”

She looked over at him startled. “Oh course I do! He’s my Dad. Why wouldn’t I?”

He shook his head. "I'm just saying. He's not your real Dad. He adopted you. Some orphans would just feel an attachment I'd guess. I mean I really wouldn't know, I was just saying."

"Oh, well not me. He's my dad in every way that counts."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Tell me more. Where did you go when he disappeared?"

"Oh God. Where didn't we go? I've been to Bulgaria, Russia, India, Australia, Tibet, France, Spain, Brazil and America."

Simon blinked a bit and looked at her oddly. "Why the devil would you go so many places? What about school?"

"Well Dad was learning all different kinds of Magic and he wanted to see the world. As for school he taught me some and got private tutors when he couldn't."

"Did you go anyplace else? Like Egypt?"

She looked startled. Well, yeah. We were there for awhile in fact. How'd you know?"

"I've seen the necklace you wear. Looks Egyptian."

She placed a hand to her chest to feel for the tiny pendant her dad had given her. "Oh. Well yeah. We were there for over a year. It was a lot of fun. Got to see the Pyramids and Dad had this crazy old man he was helping out. After Egypt we went to America and we stayed there for like around four years."

Simon whistled. "You're a worldly witch then."

"Not really," she laughed, "I've just traveled a little is all."

"If Professor Potter was off learning all this magic, who took care of you?"

She looked startled again at the questions. She motioned with her head towards the stands and they flew down to a slightly warmer place. Her cheeks were flushed pink with the crisp air and they brushed away a light snow that had fallen the day before. Once that were situated she continued.

"I guess I could say he took care of me. He was around a lot. We would sit by the fire and play games, or we would read together. I wasn't ever alone if that's what you're asking."

"But he wasn't there as much as you would need I'd think." he was probing gently.

"Well...I had Kreacher and Sirius to keep me company."

"Kreacher?"

"Our house elf. He's pretty old. Probably the oldest house elf I've ever seen. Every year Dad tries to get him to take his freedom, but the old grouch always refuses."

"How could a house elf take care of a little girl? It sounds a little irresponsible of him to me."

"Oh no! It wasn't like that," she implored to her boyfriend. "He watched me during the day and helped teach me my numbers and letters. Taught me about Magic a little; made me lunch and everything, but every day, Dad was always home come afternoon."

"What did you do for friends though? I mean moving around had to be hard to meet kids your own age. Didn't you get to play with anyone?"

She dipped her head and drew circles with her foot in the light brushing of snow.

"Not really. At least until America. I had Kelly and Michelle over there. I miss them a lot. We still write to each other, but it's not the same. We used to have a sleep over every weekend and stay up late watching movies with hot chocolate and marsh-mellows."

"Movies?" he asked inquisitively.

"It's a muggle thing," she shrugged. "It's like a moving picture only it's really long and tells a story. They're pretty cool."

"Sounds fun. Do you get to see them at all?"

"Not since the beginning of the summer. Dads taking me back there for a weekend over the holiday break though. I can't wait. With Mark and Juliana...well...you know. With them being the way they are it'll be good to see them again."

"It's not your fault you know?" He put a hand on her shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"Egypt and America. Traveling all the time. Kelly and Michelle; Mark and Juliana. It isn't all your fault."

"I know that." she said somewhat bitterly and shrugged his hand off.

"It's not your fault..."

"I said-"

"It's your Dad's." he said firmly with a bit of accusation in his voice.

"What? No...no it's not. Its nobodies fault."

"Lily," he took her hand in his and wouldn't let go as she tried to pull away, "He kept dropping you all over the place. Taking you from home to home. He never let you have any friends and when you finally do get some he makes you move again. Takes you from your school to a place where your previous father died. Then what does he do? Gives you all these rules and just orders you to cope. Then gets mad at you when your get angry. What does he expect? You're not a little girl anymore, Lily. You have the right to your own life. To make friends and make your own decisions. It's not fair what he asks of you."

"It's not like that..." her voice was barely a whisper; quivering with doubt and fear.

"Lily, my love," her breath caught in her throat at the word, "I care for too much to lie to you. You said once that when you got into trouble he took you into exile or something. Is that fair? We're kids. We're supposed to cause trouble. You're always so scared you'll disappoint him. Don't be. You should be disappointed in him."

"Simon..."

"Hush," he said softly and placed a gloved finger over her trembling lips. "He wants a perfect little girl and doesn't see that you're perfect just how you are."

"He loves me," her voice still not more than a breath over the wind.

"Of course he does. It still doesn't make him a good father. In fact from what you've told me he's a terrible dad."

"No, you're wrong," her voice rose a bit and she wiped away a few freezing tears.

"Lily, he won't even let you bring company over. How nice is that? No friends to see your home?"

"I told you, Simon. Its cause of all the dangerous projects he works on."

"So dangerous that he can leave them alone the entire day while he's teaching?"

She hadn't thought about that. "Well...I guess not."

"Take me there, Lily. Show me your home. Please? We can go now. No one would expect anything!"

She shook her head. Her thoughts were jumbled and overlapping on one another. She was confused, scared, hurt, angry, lonely and in

love. She couldn't sort anything out. She wrapped her arms around herself and tried to gain some sort of hold but it kept slipping away.

"We-I can't..." she wanted to though. She wanted to prove Simon wrong. So wrong. He was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. WRONG!

"Don't be afraid of him any more, Lily. You're twelve now. Not a child. You can make your own decisions. Like if you want to let your boyfriend, who loves you, to see your house. Is it really so wrong?"

"His workshop..."

"We don't even need to go in there. I'd like to see your room though. Your kitchen. The den, where you said you liked to read. Make the decision, Lily. Make the decision."

What could it hurt? He loved her. Right? He said so. Why would he lie about something like that? He just wanted to see her room. Maybe the kitchen. How long would it take? Maybe a half an hour? They had brooms after all.

"Ok. Let's go." she smiled a bit. Trying to put on a brave and happy face for her beloved.

Simon whooped with joy and leaned in and before she could stop him planted a kiss on her lips. Her eyes grew wide and all the confusion earlier both melted away and tightened firmed into a knot. She brought her hands to her lips and touched them softly where moments before she had felt his. Her first kiss. Her first real boy/girl kiss. It was...nice. More than nice. It was terrific!

"Thanks, love."

"But how do we get out?" she asked. "They have wards to prevent students from flying off grounds."

"How did you get to Hogsmead to see me the last couple of times? Show me where you go and we can use that."

“But that was supposed to be a secret. My dad....” She trailed off as Simon gave her a disappointed look. She was closed to crushed and quickly changed her mind.

“Sorry...It’s a tunnel that comes up under Honeydukes. We should go now before they close.”

He smiled and took her hand. With their broom they flew to the courtyard that housed the statue and Lily showed him the password. They trudged through the passage way and paused to look at the skeleton of the wizard. Simon seemed to have an almost perverse fascination with the body, but it made Lily uneasy and she pulled him along. Eager to get the mischief over with before anyone found out what they were up to.

They came up to the cellar door and she paused with a thought.

“Oh no. There’s no students around tonight. The owner will see us. We’ll get caught!” She was actually a little hopeful they could turn back now. Simon turned out to be a more talented wizard than she knew.

“Grandfather showed me a spell. Hold still.” She complied and he set his face into a hard mask of concentration. So much concentration that, a bead of sweat poured down his temple.

“Tectium Vidius!” He said in loud voice as he suddenly tapped the top of her head with his wand. She felt a curious sensation; like water running over her skin. She looked down and let out a little squeak when she couldn’t see her hands clearly. It was like she was almost invisible, but not completely.

“Bollocks,” Simon huffed out as he surveyed his work, “almost got it, but not exactly. Oh well, It’ll do.”

He placed the same charm over himself and she marveled at his skill. She really loved magic. Hand in hand, they ascended the ladder and snuck through the candy shop. Simon created a distraction by knocking a shelf down with his wand and she the old man was busy they silenced the door and snuck out quickly.



It the dark of the early night it was easy to move through the streets of Hogsmead. Few people were out and the yellow light coming out of the windows of the homes and the shops lit their way. They were almost bowled over at once point when a couple of drunken wizards stumbled out of the three broomsticks. They fell back and avoided the pair, but Lily got a small cut on her leg from a wooden box that she fell over in the ally.

She took Simon too the off-street and to her home. The tall and elegant white town house. The store front down stairs was dark and they couldn't see too much through the window except for the large 'Closed' sign in the front. Simon paused there and put his face to the window and peered in.

"No ones there."

"Kretcher and Sirius should be there."

"Oh. Will he tell your Dad?"

"I don't think so. I'll just tell him Dad let me come get something for him. He'll leave us be."

"Ok. Let's go. I want to see."

"Simon, I'm really not so sure-"

"Five minutes, Lily. That's all it will take. Five minutes to let me see. No one will know. Come on."

She gave in at the hopeful and pleading look on his face and led him around back and through the picket fence to the garden. She thought she heard something and quickly sent a wand light into the bushes, but nothing was there. It must have been her imagination. She went to the door and with a nervous look at her boyfriend she touched her wand to the middle of the door and it clicked open.

"Wow he really sounds great. You're really lucky, Lily." Simon said and she shook her head and looked around.

“What?” she asked in confusion. She felt light headed and a little dizzy.

“Your Dad. He’s quite a Wizard. You should be proud.” Simon said in concern.

She looked around. They were in the stands of the Quidditch Pitch. What were they doing? Oh yeah they were flying and she beat him in a race. Then Simon asked her about growing up with her Dad and they flew down to the stands. Then...

“What were we talking about?” she asked.

“You’re Dad. You were just telling me that he made a lot of time to spend with you even though he was so busy with work and everything.”

“Oh...right. Well he did his best. I didn’t always make it easy on him, but he can be pretty unfair at times. Kelly and Michelle-”

“Kelly and Michelle?” he looked lost for a moment.

“Yeah my friends in America. I told you about them.”

“No, sorry, you never mentioned them.”

“Oh, well you see...” and she went on to describe her friends across the ocean and the fun times they spent together. How hard it was to leave but how important Harry impressed on her that it was to go back. How he absolutely had to go back home where he, where they ‘both’, belonged.

“It’s almost curfew. We should get back.” he said when she was done with her tale.

She looked up and saw the room on its mid approach to midnight. It must have been almost 9.

“I didn’t realize we were out here so long.”

"We had a lot of fun," he smiled to her. "That always makes it go by fast."

"Yeah...I guess so. Your right though. We should head back."

"Are you ok Lily?" he asked with some concern and steadied her when she swooned a bit.

"I'm fine. Just a little light headed is all."

"Listen, Lily. Before we get back we need to talk about something." He sounded grim and Lily got a little nervous. She slowly sank back down to the bench, but Simon remained standing.

"I don't really know how to say this easily so I'll just come out with it. I don't think we should see each other anymore. I'm sorry."

Her heart stopped and her entire world seemed to narrow and fade away until there were just his words and his face.

"What? Why?" her voice cracked with heartbroken confusion.

"Look, it's been swell and all, but I'm two years older than you. I need a girl that I can kiss and touch. You're pretty young still and well...Professor Potter would kill me if we did anything like that."

"No...Simon, don't do this." she begged and started to cry. "I love you! I really do!"

"I'm sorry Lily. It just won't work out. Maybe when you're older and ready for that kind of stuff. I'll...I'll see you around." He jumped on the broom and took off in a heart beat.

"SIMON!" she screamed out for him to stop, but he kept on flying till he faded away into the darkness of the Castle. There on the cold snow capped stands she broke down into tears. A light storm of snow moved in across the skies and fell in her dark hair between her sobs. In the aftermath of the sudden and heart wrenching break up, she forgot all about her previous dizziness and confusion.

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A/N - Hope you like it. Poor Lily. Its only the beginning. Review please.

## Chapter 17

### A Sad Death

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Ginny and Harry sat in the large white marble tub, sipping champagne and nibbling off pieces of a broken bar of French chocolate. The thick fog of bubbles tickled their noses as they giggled and whispered little promises to each other. Aurora was cooing with delight as she cruised along, having a grand time taking small dives and sliding over the slick, bubble spilled floor.

“She’s certainly having fun,” Harry remarked as they watched the latest little acrobatic maneuver of the young, yet fully grown Phoenix.

“She’s gotten more playful lately. She’s always doing something silly.” Ginny told him with a hint of amusement and love for the bird.

Aurora had grown into a magnificent creature. Her feathers were a bright rose red with a dash of pleasant yellow on the breast. Her wings, when spread, were freckled with golden specks with an almost four foot spread. She was perfectly proportioned and strong. Between Harry’s knowledge and Ginny’s loving care, they groomed and guided her growth perfectly.

“She’s young. I think Sirius is a little attached to her.” he told her.

Ginny giggled. “She’s a little young to date, don’t you think? Sirius is a cradle robber.”

Harry chuckled and reached around to splash some bubbles into her face.

“Hey!” she protested and looked back to scold him with a playful glare. “Watch those bubbles Mr.”

Harry pulled her tighter against him and kissed her behind the ear; earning a soft sigh and a pleased smile. She turned around in the water and faced him. She drew along his body, and with hooded eyes

captured his lips with her own. They both moaned into the kiss and their embrace tightened further. Water and bubbles splashed over the side and onto the floor as they moved together.

“Harry...” she gasped at the height of her passion. Her hands clutching at his desperately as his lips explored and pressed against her skin and the soft curve of her breasts. There was heavy aroma of lavender and jasmine in the air as their movements sent the bubbles fluttering and dancing like a new snow fall.

Later, when their passion was sated, they embraced each other and lay together in a pair of heavy wool bath-robos while they proceeded to finish off the champagne and take turns petting Aurora in front of the crackling fire. Between her soothing song and their gentle kisses they both lay in that lazy and jelly-like state reserved for those who are so relaxed that they could barely move.

“It’s almost time for the Holidays...” Ginny finally broke the silence as she lay in his arms.

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she’ll like me?” she asked a little timidly.

Harry looked around and studied her carefully before answering. The little insecure downturn of her lips, the quick fluttering of her eye lashes, and the darting tongue, licking her lips.

“She’s a big fan of yours already. Quidditch and all. I’ve talked about you non stop for years now. She’s actually excited to meet you.”

“But will she like me?”

Harry had thought about that question himself quite a bit over the past months. He had come to the conclusion that they were a lot alike and while there might be some tension at first, he guessed that they would get on famously together.

“Yeah. She’ll be a little protective at first. Maybe a little jealous, but once you get to know each other you’ll both just...click.”

"I hope so," Ginny said and took one of his hands in her own.

They both just sat there in silence and watched the sparks in the fireplace and the dancing patterns that the flames created. Each were lost in their thoughts about the past, present, and future. Finally Aurora wiggled out from Ginny's hands and flew off through the flat towards her perch and the tray of fruit waiting for her. Their eyes followed the fleeing ruby specter for a moment till it vanished from view.

"You know," Harry said and startled her as the sudden break in the comfortable silence, "I still haven't gotten you back for the little groping incident earlier." His hands slid low towards her sides.

Ginny tensed nervously and bit her lip in thought. "Now, sweetheart. I thought that was all settled in the class room?"

Harry's hands tightened a bit at her sides and she resisted the urge to giggle and flinch away. She was very ticklish there.

"Harry...please..."

But it was too late for her. With a wicked little grin he began the counter strike. His fingers plunged into her sides and attacked. Ginny squealed in uncontrolled laughter and tried to peel away from her assailant. It proved to be of little use, however, as Harry was on top of her in a moment; dipping and weaving past her flailing arms and legs to poke and pry at every part of her that elicited such a torturous response.

"Har-Har-HAHAHA! Harry! HA, HA! St-Sto-Stop!" She laughed, almost in tears from his expertise in the subject of tickling. He finally showed mercy and stopped. Ginny was panting and tried to shove him off of her, but he pinned her hands above her head and grinned down at her.

"Do you accept defeat, Lady Ginevra?" He asked in that evil little tone of his.

She took a moment to catch her breath before answering balefully, "That was low, Harry James Potter. You sneak attacked me!"

"And I suppose groping me in the school under a guise of invisibility and calling me that absurd little name wasn't a low blow?"

Ginny batted her eyes dolefully at him and pouted. "But, it's such a tempting bum..."

"And the name?"

"Awww...Harry-poo-poo-poo-poo-bear!" she said in a little sing song voice. Harry's eyes narrowed a bit and he moved to resume the tickling.

"Ok! Ok! I'm sorry!" she gasped out desperately, before he could begin a second round.

"You, better be!" He smiled and then leaned down to kiss those pouting lips he loved so much. Ginny eagerly complied and freed her hands from his hold to wrap them around his neck. Their kiss deepened to the start of another roaring passion when a loud screech and a burst of fire startled them.

Harry and Ginny looked up from the rug to see what the interruption was. At first they thought it was Aurora, playing some silly game, but Harry noticed that the chest was missing that yellow starburst pattern.

"Sirius!" Harry scolded and got up from on top of his sprawled girlfriend. "Bloody great timing you know!"

"Harry," Ginny interrupted him and placed a placating hand on his shoulder, "I think something's upset him."

Harry noticed it too. Sirius was cawing, almost like a crow and none of the heart healing tones that normal Phoenix song had was present. He was flying around erratically and refused to land, just circled over them making that same awful sound.



“Sirius!” Harry tried to calm the bird down and soon enough Aurora flew back into the room and seemed to be trying to help calm her elder friend. Finally after a minute or two he elected to finally settle on the back of the couch and star at his companion.

“You ok, Siri?” Harry asked in concern and began to inspect the magical bird. Aurora took a perch next to him and began to tenderly smooth down a few feathers with her beak. Sirius crooned and flapped a couple times to shake the annoying attention of the other off. Aurora looked a little indignant and took a few steps away.

Harry saw that there was a small scorch mark on the underside of one wing and spots of blood on her beak. The room seemed to drop a couple of degrees for him and he wiped a bit off with his finger. With an alarmed expression he looked at his watch. He pressed a small button on the side. A blue glow came up and his jaw dropped.

“Harry?” Ginny asked in concern. “What’s wrong?”

“The wards...they’re down!”

She frowned and took a hasty step back. “But I thought you said no one could break through them in time!” her voice started to raise a little.

Harry shook his head in confusion. “They weren’t broken! They were brought down! The watch doesn’t tell me anything unless they are forcibly removed or attacked.”

A thousands thoughts seemed to race through both of their minds at the same time. Quickly, without a word, they both raced towards the bed room and put on their cloths. With wands at the ready they activated the floo and stepped through towards Harry’s house.

The twisting realm of the floo network whisked by them and they stumbled out of fire place on the other side. Harry threw up a shield immediately in case of attack and he took a step in front of Ginny. When no attack was forthcoming she threw an annoyed glare at his protectiveness and moved out from behind him.

“Seems quiet,” she remarked after taking a good look around the room.

“The lights are on...” he said quietly.

“So?”

“We haven’t been here since lunch. The lights should be off.”

Ginny looked at him from the corner of her eye. He was tense and pale, a look of fear- no a look of terror on his face. She followed him as he began to move from room to room. They didn’t dare rush through when someone could come up behind them. Harry cast a plethora of revealing charms as he went along, making sure that no one was hiding under any spell or enchantment to ambush them.

Ginny had her wand raised and ready with a strong curse on the tip of her tongue. They had gone through this scenario over a month ago, when she told him that they were in this together. Harry was to throw up his strongest shield and she would attack. Simple and powerful.

As they entered the kitchen she bumped into him from behind when he stopped suddenly. “Harry,” she started to ask, but when she looked past him her breath caught in her throat. “Oh, no,” she whispered.

Harry walked slowly, as if in a daze and knelt down beside the prone form on the ground. A thick pool of blood soaked into his robes as he picked the body up in his arms. Ginny looked around the kitchen carefully before joining him.

“Oh, Kreacher...” she choked out, and tears came unbidden to her eyes. He was dead, that much was obvious. He looked peaceful except for the gaping rend that tore down his chest. Nothing his size could survive a wound like that.

Ginny threw an arm around Harry and laid her head on his shoulder in comfort. “I’m so, so, sorry, Harry.” she said and gave him a little squeeze.

Harry looked over at her gratefully and gave a small nod of thanks. Carefully he set Kreacher's body down and stood up. The fronts of his robes were soaked with crimson life and the patterns of his trainers were left in streaked smears as he stepped away. Ginny looked at Kreacher once more and then followed Harry into the back hallway that led to his work area.

Ginny got a little tired from their nervous and slow exploration and pointed her wand ahead of them. "Homenum Revelio!" She said under her breath. Her mind was cast forward through the house and came back clean.

"It's clear. No one else is here." she told Harry, who was looking at her grimly. He gave a nod and quickened his stride.

They burst through two doors in a hurry and into his main work room. There they stopped and looked down at the floor in front of the outer chamber door. A pile of ash sat, smeared and trampled through.

"It took one of them down." Harry said sadly and raised his eyes to the door that was half torn off its hinges.

"You mean that's..."

"Yeah...that used to be a person." Ginny gulped and looked at him with a little bit of fear. He pretended not to notice.

He moved past the ashy remains and nudged open the next door. The thick black oak fell away and crashed to the ground. The dim room beyond that held some of his most dangerous and sensitive objects was empty. The shelves that lined the walls were thread bare. All enchantments were non existent. As was the door that led to the last and most important room.

Ginny locked eyes with Harry and swallowed. Together they walked forward into the large round and brightly lit chamber. Ginny started to walk forward some more, but Harry stopped her with an outstretched arm.

She looked across the space towards the center. There on the podium, surrounded by a glowing lavender spell shield, was the book. Still floating easily with whatever spells protected it. Ginny breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank Merlin," she said and leaned against the door way. "They didn't get the book." She took another look around and saw three other items on velvet cushions. One on the left and right wall and one on the far. A ring, a cloak and a wand. All safe and sound.

"Harry...are those?"

"Yeah, the deathly Hallows."

"I thought-"

"Not now, Ginny," he interrupted and started to weave his wand in intricate patterns. She shut up and let him do whatever it was he was doing. He bid her to stay there and started to take odd steps across the patterned floor. With each step the pattern seemed to shift and change. With each spells she saw and heard the crackling of a barrier fall. Close to a minute later Harry signaled that it was clear and she walked over beside him.

"What's wrong, Harry? The Book is safe." She didn't understand why he looked so worried. He didn't answer and just passed his wand over the globe. It flickered a bit and died down. The book fell with a thump. Surprisingly, Harry just flung it aside, where it burst into flame.

"Harry!" Ginny cried out and ran to save the object from destruction. He caught her arm and held her in place. She looked back and forth, from the book that was now totally destroyed, and the stern face of her boyfriend and savior; who was now twisting the top of the column. She saw that there were half formed faces along the edge and when Harry lined them up a loud crack reverberated through the room.

Ginny jumped and she felt the ground move and a set of stairs descend down to a Dark basement. She looked at the stairs slack jawed and then with sudden understanding.

"That wasn't the real book was it?" she asked.

"No," he shook his head, "It was a decoy. A copy I made with just enough truth so that, if they ever got it, they would get the wrong information."

"Clever."

"Not clever enough it seems. Look." He pointed with his wand. Her eyes followed and saw a fresh pair of foot prints in the dust.

"That's bad I take it?"

"I haven't been down here since I put the book there when we moved in." He said nothing else and walked down the stairs.

Ginny crept after him and silver fire burst along the walls and followed them to provide light. When they got to the bottom she saw two large suits of obsidian colored armor and the mutilated corpse of a large dog like creature.

"Shit." Harry said and ran forward into the next room. Ginny hurried after him, their robes flying behind them in their haste.

"NO!" Harry said in despair and fell to his knees.

The place was empty except for a message. In the air flaming words were written: 'You have failed Harry Potter.'

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"I can't believe you allowed this to happen!" Kingsley Shacklebot paced the living room of Harry's house. "I told you! You should have let the Ministry protect the book! But you insisted that it was safer here. Now look! They have the book and from all reports a small army of Inferni ready to run all over England! I can't believe you let this happen!"

"It's not his fault!" Ginny said angrily and rose up to stand in front of the Minister. "You have no idea the amount of protections Harry had around it!"

"Not enough it seems! What are we supposed to do now, Harry?" he rounded on the man in question, who was sitting in a chair with his head in his hands. "Tell us how we can stop them? It took years for the Map of Atlas to stop the Unforgivables! It'll be a new wave of death, control and pain!"

"Why won't the map help?" Ginny had to ask. It was supposed to be able to track and name any caster of the three Unforgivable curses. An entire squad of Aurors was always on station to respond in seconds when the Map notified them.

"Because," Harry said sullenly from his chair, "The map focuses on the magic that the spell comes from. If they use the techniques hidden in the book, the Map will only name the victim."

"I don't understand." she said.

"The Map will name the victim as the caster since it's their magical core that's being used to fuel the spell."

"Oh...shit."

"That's an understatement, Ginny." Kingsley said and resumed his pacing.

"Sir!" an Auror with outrageously colored hair ran into the room, "We discovered how they breached the security wards!"

Harry and Shacklebolt both looked at the man waiting. He looked a little startled at the sudden intense scrutiny, but gave the information.

"Someone had a wand that was keyed into the house. They used it on the back door and it took the wards down."

Harry stood up with such a look of fury on his face that Ginny stumbled away against the wall. His face was purple with rage and his eyes seemed to blaze in anger.

“LILY!” he spat and marched out of the room. Ginny gathered herself and ran after him.

“Harry!” she said when she caught up to him in front of the fireplace, preparing to floo to his office in Hogwarts. He ignored her and activated the floo and jumped in. She grabbed onto his arm and followed after him. When they tumbled through the over side he angrily shook her off and ran out of the office. She growled in frustration and continued the chase.

“Harry, calm down! You don’t know what could have happened!”

“The hell I don’t!” he said during the swift trot. “She wanted some trinket or to show her friends around so she snuck out of the castle. I told her not to let anyone in! Now look! Kreacher’s dead and the book is stolen! I told her!”

“Harry they could have taken her wand, or her for that matter!”

“No,” he shook his head, “She’s better protected than I am and the wards only respond to her willing wand. It had to be her, free of enchantments, to open the door.”

“What if she was threatened? Or forced to?”

“There are half a dozen keywords I taught her in case someone tried to hurt her, take her or force her to do something she didn’t want to do. All she had to do was say them and I’d know she was in trouble.”

“Harry-”

He rounded on her suddenly and shook a finger in her face. “Don’t defend her, Ginny! The ONLY way the wards could be brought down that way, is if she wanted to go in. The ONLY way.”

Ginny stood there a moment as he turned away and continued his trek towards the Gryffindor tower. She was hurt that he was taking his anger out on her too. She understood that the night was a catastrophe, but he didn't need to be angry with her too. She shook herself out of the small daze and hurried after him again. Hopefully she could stop him from doing or saying something that could forever alienate him from his daughter.

She backed off in the hopes that he would calm down, but as he burst through the portrait and into the common room that hope was dashed against the wall.

The students who were working on their homework looked up in surprise and then fear at the visage of power in front of them. The Boy-Who-Lived: full of fury and glaring around at all their faces, searching for the one he needed.

"Where's Lily?" he growled out when he didn't see her. Mark, who was sitting alone in a chair, raised a trembling hand and pointed towards the stairs leading up to the girls' dormitory.

"She's really upset Professor Potter." he dared to tell the angry man in front of him. Harry paused briefly and just looked at him.

"You haven't seen upset yet, boy."

Mark flinched and looked confused. As they marched past Ginny laid a comforting hand on the kids shoulder, but couldn't stop for long as Harry tramped up the stairs. An alarm started to go off, but Harry just slashed his wand and it fell silent and the stairs remained intact.

They reached the second years' door and Harry kicked it open and marched in. Ginny struggled in behind him and looked around. On the bed was Lily sobbing her heart out, being held by another young girl with brown hair. They both jumped and looked towards the door. Lily's face looked relieved and she started to scrambled up to run towards him, but she was halted by Harry's words.

"You!" he pointed; his voice was dripping with accusation and anger. Her face fell once more into a mixture of hurt and uncertainty.



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When Simon returned to the common room and ignored all questions about why he returned without Lily; Mark and Juliana immediately broke curfew and set off for the Quidditch Pitch. They found her curled up in the stands crying; balling her eyes out.

“Lil’s?” Mark asked gently as they sat down next to her. Her head snapped up and she gave a little hiccup of a sob.

“Oh, Mark!” she cried and threw her arms around him. He returned the embrace and looked over at Juliana in question. She met his eyes and mouthed some words. His face grew set and he cradled his friend, who was clinging to him so tight that she was threatening to force the air from his lungs.

“Lils!” he gasped out, “I can’t breathe...”

Reluctantly, she pulled away and quieted down her tears and tried to wipe the flood away on her sleeve. She seemed to sag and wilt before their eyes, and neither with a clue as to what happened to cause this dramatic break down of their normally, temperamental friend.

“Lily?” Samantha sidled up next to her and tilted her head to face her. “What’s wrong? What happened?” Her voice was kind, calm and friendly.

Lily sniffed and wiped away some more tears. “Si-Simon, Bro-Broke up wi-wi-with me!”

“Oh, Lily! I’m so sorry.” She reached out to pull her best friend into a hug. She really was sorry. She didn’t like Simon, and doubly so now, but that didn’t mean she wanted Lily to get hurt.

She looked over and saw Mark, red in the face, open his mouth in undoubtedly what was to be the wrong thing to say. "Mark," she interrupted him beforehand, "Lily's cold. Could you lend her your coat?"

His brows furrowed together and his lips puckered out a bit in protest, but he reluctantly pulled it off and handed it over. Juliana slid the thick garment over Lily and pulled her up. Mark seemed to get the idea and didn't say anything. He just went to Lily's other side and helped to take her back to the castle.

It took the better part of thirty minutes to make it back. That grey haired old grinch of a caretaker seemed to be stalking them through the hallways. The man seemed to have some uncanny ability or extra-sensory perception that allowed him to sniff out students who were up to no good. Finally they staggered through the portrait hole and into the common room where students were working on lessons, reading books, or playing games.

Juliana told Mark to remain downstairs while she took Lily to her room for a change of clothes and some girl to girl talk. He didn't much like the idea of staying behind while Lily was hurting, but he couldn't very well try to go up 'those' steps. So Juliana took her up to the room and helped her into a cotton nightgown.

Lily settled her head in Juliana's lap, while she brushed her tangled hair out.

"Tell me what happened?" Juliana asked as she stroked a wire brush through Lily's long black hair.

"I don't know," she replied; her voice distraught and a whisper. "At first it was fun. We were flying around, playing broom tag. Then he asked me about my life and we went to the benches to talk. We were there for awhile. Then, when it was time to go back, he just said he didn't want to see me anymore." She broke out in a new set of hiccups and buried her face in her numb hands.

"That's it?" Juliana asked incredulously, "He didn't say why?"

Lily shook her head, "He said...he said I couldn't do things with him that the older girls could. He said he wanted 'things' that I wasn't willing to give him."

Juliana scowled. "That prat! You just wait Lily. The rest of the girls will hear about this. We'll make sure everyone knows he just used you. No one will give him the time of day. You just watch. His life is over with. The rest of the year will be miserable for him."

"He's a jerk..."

"An idiot!"

"Slime! No-worse than slime!"

"He's that crusty stuff that leaks out of a gnome's ear!"

"Dragon dung!"

Lily sat up and looked at Juliana for a moment and then they both burst with laughter. It only lasted a moment though before Lily's face collapsed once more. She laid back down and together they just talked. They caught up with the little nuisances that school had. Their classes and most of all they talked about the nasty ways they wanted to see Simon Dottingham die. Juliana's personal favorite so far was: digestion by some horrid man-eating plant. The type of plant they weren't clear on, but as long as it ate boys it was ok by them.

Lily was finally settling down when the door suddenly burst open and banged against the wall. They both jumped and looked towards the doorway and froze. Professor Potter jumped through, looking angrier than Juliana had ever seen. Behind him squeezed a gorgeous red haired woman, who looked anxious and worried about something.

When Lily saw her Dad barge in her heart soared. He would fix things. He always knew how to make her feel better. She started to get up to run to him, but her limbs froze and her heart lunged at the first word out of his mouth.

"You!" he declared and pointed at her. She took a step back and clutched at the top of her nightgown. Her mind reeled at the intended accusation. What had she done? Was he mad that Simon broke up with her? Shouldn't he be mad at Simon?

"I told you not to let anyone into the house, didn't I?" He began a slow walk towards her. She'd never seen him this mad before. He was scary; terrifying. She began to back away and looked at him in confusion.

"I didn't-"

"Don't lie to me! Do you have any idea what you've done?! The damage you've caused?"

She shook her head and continued to back away. She glanced over at Juliana, but her friend was pressed against the headboard of the bed, looking petrified. "I don't know what-"

"You promised me! You gave me your word that I could trust you. You told me you wouldn't disobey me anymore."

Lily didn't know what to say, or what he was yelling at her about. All she could do was shake her head and mouth words that she couldn't seem to voice.

"Harry, stop..." a red haired woman next to him said. Lily briefly remarked that it was Ginny Weasley. Her favorite Quidditch player and her Dad's girlfriend. But right then she really didn't care. Her heart was breaking slowly.

"All the lies. All the broken promises," Harry continued, ignoring Ginny, "I can't believe I ever trusted you!"

Lily felt the door to the bathroom slam against her back as her Dad closed in on her and grabbed her arm.

"Who did you let in?" He gave her a little shake, "Who went in that house?" Another shake. "Who?" Another.

“Harry!” Ginny said and tried to pull him away. Lily felt her fear grow into a cold hard anger.

“I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING!” Lily screamed at the top of her lungs and burst into tears that she didn’t know she had left. She yanked herself out of his grasp and ran into the bathroom and slammed the door, locking it behind her.

“Don’t you dare-”

“Harry!” Ginny yanked him around and got in his face, “What the bloody hell is wrong with you! Can’t you see she’s hurt? That something bad happened? Get a grip!”

“Don’t you tell me how to speak to my daughter!” he began angrily.

“Yes! Your daughter! Bloody hell, Harry, she’s just a little girl! You don’t shake her like a doll and scream at her! Get a hold of yourself.”

Harry felt his rage ebb away and closed his eyes. He took a few breaths and tried to calm down.

“Ginny,” he said in a much calmer voice, “She’s lied and betrayed my trust so many times...”

“But not this time...” Ginny laid a hand on his cheek. “Something bad happened, Harry. Didn’t you see she was crying when you came in? Let me deal with this. I know how to talk to her. Why don’t you take her friend there down to the kitchens and bring up some butter-beers. I’ll handle Lily and find out what happened. Ok?”

He looked doubtful for a moment, but a glance at the door and the sobs that came from behind it seemed to force his mind.

“You really think...?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, “And when you come back be ready to apologize. A girl shouldn’t have to be yelled at like that by her father.”

“Ginny....”

"I know what I'm talking about, Harry. Trust me on this."

He looked back at the door one last time and nodded. He looked over towards the frightened Juliana and beckoned her over. She crept towards the towering Professor and without a word they both walked out the room.

Ginny steeled herself for a hell of a time and lightly knocked on the door.

"Go away!" Lily yelled out from behind the thick wood.

"Lily...You don't know me, but my names Ginny. I'm your father's girlfriend. Could we talk for a bit?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"I know, Lily. Could you let me in? Your Dad's not here right now. He went down to the kitchens for a bit. It'll be just us two girls. How does that sound? Just two girls talking." She waited a bit, but nothing happened. "Lily?" A second later she heard a lock thrown and the door peeked open to reveal a blotchy and red eyed little girl.

Ginny put on her kindest smile. "Hi there."

"Sniff'... Hi..." The door opened wider and Ginny stepped inside.

Lily took a step out and looked around to make sure Harry wasn't lurking near by.

"So you're Ginny, huh?" she wiped her eyes.

"Yeah. That's me."

"I got your autograph, you know..."

"I remember." Ginny's smile grew wider. "I didn't know who you were then."

Lily shrugged a bit. "Dad, took me to the game." Even Ginny had to flinch at the spite that came out of her mouth at the mention of Harry.

"Why don't we sit down?" Ginny led the wreck of a girl over to a bed and sat down. Lily followed behind and took a seat as well. Her hands playing with the fold of her nightgown.

"I saw you crying when we came in. You want to tell me what happened?"

"My boyfriend broke up with me."

"Oh... I'm sorry." She did feel bad. First sweethearts were always hard. "Do you want to talk about it?" Lily shook her head. "Ok, mind if I ask you a few things then?" she got a shrug.

"Well, I just need to know if you left the common room at all tonight."

Lily gave a guarded look and slowly nodded.

"Did you leave the castle?"

"No, we went to the Quidditch Pitch...."

'Hmm.' Ginny thought. "That's it? You didn't go back home to pick anything up? It's alright if you did, we just need to know. It's very important."

"I didn't do anything!" Lily replied stubbornly. Ginny raised her hands in defense.

"I'm not saying you did, but something very bad happened tonight and your Dad's very scared."

"I don't care if he's scared or not...what happened?"

Ginny resisted the urge to sigh. "Someone broke into your house. They stole something very important." She didn't think it was the right time to tell her about Kreacher. From what Harry said, she was very close to the old house-elf.

Lily gasped and brought a hand to her mouth. "I didn't do it. I only went to the Quidditch Pitch with Simon."

Ginny carefully, but kindly, scrutinized the girl as she talked. She couldn't see any signs of deceit or a lie and felt relieved. "I believe you." she said.

"You do?" Lily looked hopeful.

"Yeah, I do." Ginny nodded and took the girl's hand in her own. "But did anything happen today? Anything odd? Did you misplace your wand anywhere? Did anyone take it for even a moment?"

Lily thought for a moment and shook her head. "No...nothing at all."

"What about any strangers? See any professor's you haven't seen before? Anyone at all?"

Something seemed to tug at the corner of Lily's mind. Like a memory that kept slipping out of her grasp. Like trying to catch smoke. Ginny must have noticed the slight confusion on her face.

"Lily? Who did you see?"

"I-I don't know. I think so, but I'm not sure."

"Can you explain? That's kinda vague, sweetie."

"Well, I think I remember something, but then I forget. Like a name on the tip of my tongue, but I can't remember."

Ginny grew a little suspicious at this point. "Sweetie, this is very important. I need you to think really hard now. Do you remember any time you were confused at all? Time that you might have missed? Anything, no matter how small."

It was at this point that Lily remembered the dizziness and confusion at the Pitch.



“Now that you mention it, yeah.”

“When?”

“Before Simon broke up with me. One moment we were talking and the next I was really dizzy. It seemed like it was darker too.”

Ginny sighed, knowing part of what happened. The girl had a hasty memory charm put on her. It must have been strong enough to get past the amulet. “Can I see your necklace, Lily? The one your Dad makes you wear?”

Lily shrugged and reached into her nightgown. “It’s not here!” she gasped and looked inside. “Oh, no! I lost it!”

Ginny doubted that. “I don’t think you did, Lily. I think someone took it from you so they could put a memory charm on you.”

“A memory charm?”

“It’s a spell. It makes you forget something and replaces it with a different memory.”

Lily’s eyes widened and she looked around frantically for a moment. “Do you think-”

“Shush,” she placed a finger to the girl’s lips, “Whatever happened tonight is not your fault, ok? When Harry comes back we can sort everything out.”

Lily’s nervousness faded quickly at the mention of her face and she put on a rather cute, but stubborn look. “I don’t wanna talk to him.”

“Now, Lily. Your Dad was just really scared. He didn’t mean to act that way.” Ginny said

“Yes he did! Whenever anything goes wrong I’m always the first one the blames.”

“Well, in defense of Harry, you do get into trouble a lot. At least that’s what I heard.”

Lily shrugged and moved a little away on the bed.

“Please. Listen to me. Your Dad is a very important man. He was guarding what was stolen tonight. I can’t tell you what it is, that’s for Harry to tell you. But I can tell you that it’s very, very dangerous. He thought it was you because the Aurors that were searching your home said that your wand was used to open the door.”

“But I didn’t leave the Pitch all night!”

Ginny raised her hand again to calm the girl down. “I know sweetie. But someone might have made you and you just don’t remember. That necklace was supposed to protect you from certain spells, but if someone forced it off of you they could have made you do something you didn’t want to do.”

“If I was forced, then why did Dad yell at me like that?”

Ginny scooted closer and put an arm around the girl. “Because he feels guilty. Harry always feels guilty when something he doesn’t plan on happens. He’s scared, angry, and worried. He thinks he failed in protecting the-the thing, failed protecting you, and failed in protecting the Wizarding World. You should know by now how broody he gets when something bad happens. He always seems to think he should have done more to stop it than he did. Even though he did everything he could think of.”

Lily gave a reluctant nod of agreement. “I still won’t forgive him....”

“And I don’t expect you to.”

They both turned to see Harry standing in the doorway with several bottles of the sweet beverage in his hand. His face looked closed and guarded to Ginny. She wondered how long he had been standing there.

“Harry, we may need your help here.”

“Did you find out what happened?” He glanced at Lily and quickly looked away, afraid to meet her accusing eyes.

“I think she’s had memory charm cast on her.”

“A memory charm?!” he looked startled, “That’s not possible. The necklace-”

“Isn’t there. It’s been stolen.” She gave him a stern look and glanced at Lily, signaling him to be careful with his words and his temper.

Harry blinked, his mouth frozen open in mid sentence. “Bloody hell, I didn’t think of that. Bloody hell, how could I be so stupid?!” he banged his hand against the wall.

“Now isn’t the time for self pity, Harry. You need to get rid of this memory charm to find out what happened.”

“I don’t want him, casting anything on me. Can’t you do it?” Lily begged her, throwing every ounce of vulnerability she could muster in the look.

Ginny looked between father and daughter in alarm. “I-I don’t know how, Lily. Removing memory charms is a dangerous thing if you don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t want to wind up babbling like a two year old for the rest of your life.”

Lily drew back and chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Lily, I know you’re mad at me right now, and rightfully so, but I need to see if I can get past the charm. Did Ginny explain what happened?” Lily nodded. “Then let me cast a few spells, it won’t hurt. Afterwards you can hit me, curse me, do whatever you want to me. Deal?”

“Will you leave?”

“I’ll walk out right after.”

"I mean the school. Will you leave Hogwarts?"

Harry looked stunned and swallowed. He looked infinitely guilty, but now it was mixed with a profound hurt. Ginny wanted to reach out to him, but decided to let this one play out. She could only interfere so much before crossing the line.

"If-if that's what you want. I'll turn in my notice to the Headmistress tonight."

"It is!"

Harry gave a solemn nod. "Ok. Will you let me do the test?" Lily nodded and he walked across the room and pulled up a chair.

"When do you think she was charmed?" he asked Ginny.

"Tonight. She was at the pitch when she suddenly got confused and dizzy. She noticed that it suddenly got darker. It must of been around that time."

Harry nodded and looked back to Lily. "Sweetheart, close your eyes and try to think back to that moment. You'll feel like there is a kind of fog obscuring everything. Focus on that fog and imagine a wind blowing at that fog. A strong warm wind..."

Lily did as he asked and he raised his wand and put it close to her temple. She kept trying and trying and screwed up her face in concentration.

"Don't try to grab at it, Lily. That's impossible. Just imagine yourself standing in front of it. A strong wind, like that tornado. As strong as that. Your hair is flying towards the fog the wind is so strong. You feel like the wind is about to pick you up and blow you into the fog...."

Ginny watched in fascination as a silvery blue nimbus surrounded Lily's head like a halo. Harry kept repeating the instructions over and over again. His voice a hypnotic drone that got softer and softer till

they both just sat there amidst his powerful magic. Ginny leaned back on the soft bed to watch and wait.

Harry entered Lily's mind and saw her in front of the fog. It was thick, an almost solid wall. He merged himself with the wind and felt himself carried into the grey mist. It was like a maze trying to get through. He sensed tendrils connecting to other parts of his daughters mind and he almost lost concentration from the agony he felt from seeing the utter rape that was inflicted on the most important person in his life. And a rape was the only thing he could call it. The memory charm; whatever it was, was latched and imbedded so firmly into her subconscious mind that breaking it would leave her a vegetable. A gibbering, drooling shell. He had only one choice. To slide through the fog to the memory beyond and hope that he could find his way back.

So that's what he did. He moved on the wind through the cloudy obstruction. Letting the currents of the magic push him through the cracks on its own. Not trying to break through, but creep through. He felt it getting lighter and lighter till it faded away and he was inside the memory.

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Harry found himself hovering in the air above the Pitch. He saw Lily and the Dottingham boy on their brooms, hovering in place, just talking.

"If Professor Potter was off learning all this magic, who took care of you?" he heard Simon say. Lily looked up at him with a bewildered expression and he watched them fly down towards the stands, pulling him along with the memory.

"I guess I could say he took care of me. He was around a lot. We would sit by the fire and play games, or we would read together. I wasn't ever alone if that's what you're asking." He heard. He smiled a bit at the memories of that time. They were nice.

"But he wasn't there as much as you would need I'd think." Simon returned and Harry frowned. He felt a sudden pang and twist in his

gut at the boy's accusation. He shook away his wandering thoughts and focused on the conversation again.

"What did you do for friends though? I mean moving around had to be hard to meet kids your own age. Didn't you get to play with anyone?" Harry growled a bit.

"Not really. At least until America. I had Kelly and Michelle over there. I miss them a lot. We still write to each other, but it's not the same. We used to have a sleep over every weekend and stay up late watching movies with hot chocolate and marsh-mellows." Lily said and Harry reeled back a bit. His face going ashen.

She had friends in Egypt and the other countries. She had to have didn't she? Surely he would have noticed if she was lonely; wouldn't he? He felt her hurt in the memory, hidden behind a façade of acceptance. He began to get a sinking feeling in his gut at the direction this conversation was taking.

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"It's not your fault you know?" Simon put a hand on her shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"Egypt and America. Traveling all the time. Kelly and Michelle; Mark and Juliana. It isn't all your fault."

"I know that." she said somewhat bitterly and shrugged his hand off.

"It's not your fault..."

"I said-"

"It's your Dad's." Simon said and Harry was almost flung out of the memory by pain that she felt and thus, he did. His own sudden pain and guilt seemed to amplify until he was howling and trembling. He tried to scratch at his skin, but his hands just past harmlessly through.

He stared for a moment. He was too close. Too emotionally connected with Lily. Her pain was his. Her guilt, his fault. Her life under his guidance. He needed to lessen the strength of the spell or he could die here. He sent a tendril of power back along the astral line towards his body and felt the click that separated her feelings from his. He took an imaginary breath and focused again on the memory.

“Lily, he kept dropping you all over the place. Taking you from home to home. He never let you have any friends and when you finally do get some he makes you move again. Takes you from your school to a place where your previous father died. Then what does he do? Gives you all these rules and just orders you to cope. Then gets mad at you when you get angry. What does he expect? You’re not a little girl anymore, Lily. You have the right to your own life. To make friends and make your own decisions. It’s not fair what he asks of you.”

“It’s not like that...” her voice was barely a whisper; quivering with doubt and fear.

“Lily, my love,” her breath caught in her throat at the word, “I care for you too much to lie to you. You said once that when you got into trouble he took you into exile or something. Is that fair? We’re kids. We’re supposed to cause trouble. You’re always so scared you’ll disappoint him. Don’t be. You should be disappointed in him.”

Harry gritted his teeth and if he could have cried in a memory he would have. Such a wicked boy. Just enough truth, lies, and misdirection to crush the inhibitions of a twelve year old girl. To turn her from her father. But he was right.

Harry toted her around the world like a luggage bag while he learned his little tricks and useless incantations. For what? A country on the brink of war, a small business, and a daughter that he alienated? A daughter that didn’t have any friends and the few she did have he pulled her away from? He was wretched. Horrible. Evil and uncaring. A bad father. He had a chance to do right by his parents and make their sacrifice something special. To raise and nurture an orphan like himself. He failed himself. He failed his Mum.

Every instinct told him to pull back. To drop the spell and fall to his hands and knees and beg Lily for forgiveness. To plead with her and withdraw from everything again, but her. To shower her with all his attention and love in the hopes that maybe, just maybe, she would forgive him and he could make amends for his mistakes.

Damn Simon. Damn him self.

When Harry finally pulled him self together and pressed on into the memory he listened as Simon twisted everything into something even more ugly. Used and manipulated Lily; his daughter, into breaking her promise and taking him into the house. He listened with anger and self recrimination as she agreed. Not to fall prey to Simon's advances, but to prove him wrong. That she was an independent spirit.

He should have told her everything. She fell prey to the same thing that happened in his fifth year. Lack of knowledge would lead to the Book of Phyre being stolen under his watch.

He waited as they walked down the tunnel and into Hogsmead. His eyes noticed what Lily in her conscious did not. Figures in the shadows of the street, robed and hooded, watching the young couple. She led him into the back yard. The council gathering in camouflage behind them. Spells of cloak and concealment abound.

Lily raised her wand and opened the door. The tell tale flutter of the wards lowering to allow her and her 'guests' in. They struck.

Harry leapt forward in a vain attempt to shield her from the spell that struck her in the back. She cried out as the nerve numbing curse felled her and she twitched on the ground, her limbs going haywire. The Council, all of them, melded out from the shadows and walked towards the door.

Simon beamed up at the figure in the lead, robed in gold. "Grandfather. I did it. Are you proud?"

Harry reeled yet again. Grandfather? Simon was Irium's grandson? That certainly explained a lot. The bastard used his own grandson to manipulate his little girl.



Irium laid a hand on the boy's head. "I am, Simon." Harry noted how silken, yet spidery his voice was. Charming, but with just a hint of something malevolent behind it. "Take us in. She opened the wards for you. You can let us in now."

Simon stepped inside and motioned them all through. The wards didn't stop them as they walked through the door and stepped over Lily's twitching body.

"Reverence, what about the girl?" a short and heavy set man in silver asked from behind.

Irium just gestured dismissively. "Bring her in, but don't close the door or else the wards will lock us in."

How on earth did they know so much about how his spells worked? Another mystery to solve at a later date. The man bent down and examined the girl briefly, then cast a silencing spell on her and lifted her up. Harry cursed. He should have accounted for that. Lily's protections were verbally activated. If she was silenced they wouldn't let him know she was in trouble.

She was aware so the memory continued as she was bound and brought into the house. They walked into the foyer and Sirius, chirped in alarm.

"Reverence!" one of the men warned. The Phoenix hopped into the air in preparation to flash away, presumably to Harry's side, but a spell from Irium's wand struck it under the wing and he fell mid jump to the floor, not moving. Harry knew the bird was ok, since it came to his side. It was just a stunning spell.

"So he has a Phoenix. He impresses me more every day." Irium said.

"Shouldn't we kill it sir?" the tallest of the group asked. Irium turned his hidden face, a spell Harry used often, towards the man.

"Kill? A Phoenix? Stick to counting your money. You obviously have no knowledge of magical creatures. You can't kill a Phoenix without

strong dark rituals. The kind that we don't have the time nor reason to perform right now."

The man seemed to shuffle a bit as if embarrassed. Harry would have laughed if he wasn't watching with growing horror at the man who held Lily. She was kicking and screaming silently as he dragged her by the hair, her hands bound behind her back. Harry reached for his wand, but realized it was pointless to try and cast a spell in a memory. The wand wasn't real.

The Council moved into the workroom while Simon waited by the door. Making sure a gust of wind didn't blow it closed or that no one came snooping around. They paused in front of the large oak door. The first of the defenses he had set up besides the outer wards. The memory pulled him away as the man holding Lily slipped away from the group. He dragged her into the living room.

"You will unhand my Lily!" an old scratchy voice sounded out. A pattering of feet ran across the room and the man turned to see Kreacher running at him with a very large chef's knife. Harry turned away as the Council member kicked out and knocked the old house elf to the ground. He then flicked his wand and a spray of blood erupted from Kreacher's chest. The old elf gurgled and twitched but soon fell still as the blood began to pool around his body.

Harry closed his eyes at the look of sorrow and grief that spread over Lily's face. Kreacher and her were very close. He doted on her a lot. She reminded him a lot of Regulus, Harry always suspected.

"You're father has given us a lot of trouble, girl. The time and money wasted due to his interference is beyond forgiving." The fat man said and Harry's eyes snapped open again. "Time to pay the piper..."

Harry screamed and went berserk as the man pawed at Lily's leg and dragged his disgusting tongue up her neck and cheek. He forgot that in a memory magic doesn't work and uselessly sent a lethal spell at the man, aiming to kill. He charmed and swung his fists and kicked and screamed some more. Each punch passing through like mist, as her winter coat was torn away and the man began to work at her

school robes. Lily was screaming, still in silent horror, her tears being flung away as she violently shook her head.

“NOOOOO!” Harry screamed and went feral. All thought flew from his mind and he lunged, but pasted through the man.

Somehow Lily got her legs between her and the soon to be dead Council member and pushed off, kicking him away. He started forward again, but she kicked out and struck him hard in the face. Although hidden, Harry heard the crunch and saw the blood leak out behind the smoky screen. The man cursed and pulled out his wand again. Lily rolled away, but not before a cutting curse put a slice in her leg. It was a shallow cut, but Harry was too lost to care. The pervert tackled Lily again, her momentary advantage gone.

“It’s time girl!” The creature hissed out; his voice wobbled from the broken nose.

A bang, a flash of light, and a scream.

The man was flung away and clawed at his burning robes. He stood up and quickly banished them to show a heavy set man, half bald with a large birthmark that resembled South America on his neck.

“What do you think you are doing, Thomas?” Irium hissed as he walked into the room.

“Reverence,” Thomas stuttered out, his face going pale, “I thought that since Potter caused us so much harm that-that-”

“I can see what you thought. It’s obvious! You disgust me! I made my intentions clear. I will not allow innocent children to be harmed. Lily, most of all.”

Harry fell to his knees, “Thank God, thank God, thank God,” he prayed over and over again. His beautiful daughter having escaped the ravishes of that brute.

Thomas scowled a bit. “What makes her so special? When we release the Inferni children are bound to die then.”

Irium tilted his head slightly and the silent and unseen regard all the more unnerving when he answered. "Because I say so. We will have sins and blood on our hands to last a hundred life times when this is over. I will not let us kill or steal the innocence of a child in cold blood. You would do well to remember who is the Prime."

Thomas didn't say anything.

"Perhapes you need a lesson in how to behave?"

Thomas took a step back and lowered his eyes. "No lesson is needed, Reverence. Your will is Phyre's."

"I'm glad you understand. Join the others. We are through the first door, but we lost Samuel to a flash fire curse. Potter is crafty in his spell designs. We need your knowledge to remove the items in the first chamber. They may be of some use to us. Go."

"Yes, Reverence." he scuttled out of the room like a cross between a toad and a rat.

Irium, Harry never thought he would bless the man, but he did, walked over and knelt down to Lily, who was futilely mouthing her key words over and over again. He summoned her coat and gently draped it around her.

"I must apologize, Lily," he told her, his voice suddenly sounding much more pleasant, that spidery quality no longer a taint, "It was not my intention that you be harmed, much less touched in so vile a manner. I can only offer you this: So long as I am Prime of the Council of Phyre, we shall not harm or touch you again. No matter what. It is but a small compensation I can offer. You will be forever free of our influence."

Lily didn't seem to be listening or caring. She just struggled to free her hands and kept trying to alert Harry to her situation. As she scooted away she slid through the blood and bumped against Kreacher's body. She seemed to be screaming hysterically now, her

eyes wide and her mouth just open in the silent terror. Irium looked at the body and sighed.

“So eager to kill. There was a time when the Council was patient and just. Ambitious, yes, but not callous and murderous. If only we could have those days back. It is partly my fault, I fear. I focused too much on their uses and not enough on their character. I created a group that thrives on bettering their place in the world through any means possible. What little integrity that remains resides solely with me now. With my passing, maybe so does the real Council. None are fit to rule. None have the temperament.”

He shook off his self musings and lifted Lily to her feet. He banished the blood off her clothes and repaired her clothes.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to put a rather powerful memory charm on you, my dear. While I shudder to think of you being hurt, if your father is the man on integrity I hear he is, he will not attempt to lift it, therefore your mind will remain intact.”

Irium looked up into the air and continued. “In the off chance you discover this little piece of duplicity Mr. Potter and are viewing her memory, or having it retold, I can only offer again my apologies for the way your daughter was treated. The Council policies their own, and Thomas will be dealt with accordingly. As far as the Book you stole from us is concerned... frankly, I am tired of dealing with you. Consider our business concluded once we have the first half. Leave the country again Mr. Potter; and vanish like before. Do not seek us or attempt to recover those pages. If you do, consider the truce I offer at an end. We will throw everything in our power at you. You will be...punished. Consider young Lily, and the idea of her growing up without a father. An orphan, as I hear you are. You have been warned.”

He pointed his wand at Lily and cast a sleeping hex. The memory went black in the blink of an eye and Harry felt himself yanked back through the fog like a yo-yo.

He opened his eyes to see Lily calmly sitting in front of him on her head. He lowered his wand and the nimbus glow vanished.

“Harry?” Ginny asked in concern. The look on his face alarmed her.

Lily opened her eyes and blinked. Harry couldn’t take it any more. He reached out and pulled her to him and peppered her face, lips and hair with kisses, hugging her tighter and tighter, all the while whispering, “I’m so sorry baby! I’m so, so sorry! Please, please forgive me! I’m so, so sorry!” He was crying by then, his emotions having an outlet outside the memory.

Lily was bewildered and all her anger at her Dad faded away into a cross between concern for him and fear at what he saw. She still didn’t remember a thing, but what could’ve been so bad to make him act like this? She returned the hug with a bit of hesitation.

“It-Its ok, Daddy. You can stop crying. What’s wrong? What did you see?”

Harry pulled away and stamped back his tears and tried to school his face a bit more. “Nothing, baby. Nothing at all. I-I just can’t break the memory. I’m sorry I couldn’t, that’s all.”

Ginny and Lily frowned together and shared a look. It was obvious he was lying through his teeth. Lily pulled away and picked up her pillow to hug it to her. Ginny’s heart went out to the girl.

“Ginny....” Harry said in a strangled whisper.

“Yeah?”

“Can you take Lily to my office and watch her? I have to do something.”

“Umm, ok. Where are you going?”

“I have to look into something about the robbery. I don’t want to leave Lily alone for now.”

“I can look after myself, Dad.”

He leaned forward and tucked her hair behind an ear, a familiar gesture they always shared. "I know you can sweetheart. I'd just feel better if someone was with you for now. Think of it as an excuse for you and Ginny to get to know each other better, ok?"

Lily gave a doubtful nod and stood up to change into something more presentable for the trek through the castle. Ginny tugged on the sleeve of Harry's shirt and he looked over.

"Can I talk to you for a moment? In private?" she gave a glance towards Lily. Harry hesitated and then nodded. She led him outside the door and placed a silencing charm around them.

"What's going on, Harry? She has all the signs of having been memory charmed and you just lied to her in there. I know you did."

Harry looked down and seemed to tremble. His fist lashed out and struck the wall, leaving a small blood smear from the torn knuckles.

"Harry!"

"They touched her Ginny. They cursed and...touched my daughter." His voice was low and cold, barely containing something dark that Ginny wasn't sure she wanted to see exposed. She trembled and covered her eyes.

"Did they..."

"No, but it was close. Irium stopped the guy. But I can't just forget this. I can't let it go. I have to do something."

Ginny swallowed and took a step closer and laid a hand on his arm. "Harry, maybe you should let the Aurors handle this one. You might...you might do something you'll regret."

His eyes flashed up and met hers. She had to stop herself from backing away. Her argument fell away. She knew him in this mode. He couldn't be reasoned with now. He didn't have to say anything. Something deep down inside of her understood. They violated

something sacred. This suddenly wasn't a shadowy war for power and stronger magic. It was personal to the deepest levels. She leaned up and gave him the softest and most tender kiss yet.

"Come back safe." He nodded and she slipped back into the room to help Lily get ready for her move to Harry's office.

Harry stood in the hallway for a moment. His mind replayed the images over and over again. Second by second his doubts and humanity melted away under Lily's horrific memory. Whatever it took. He would find this 'Thomas'. To hell with the truce and to hell with 'policing their own.'

There was a spell. A dark spell. Hidden in the pages of one of his more nefarious books. He knew it. Knew the incantation. There was only one problem. It required blood. Unwilling blood. Human blood of an ancestor. It was a safe bet that Thomas was wherever Irium was. There was only one option: Simon. He would use Simon to find the people who had violated that which was sacrosanct: his daughter. He closed his eyes and felt something wither away. Still, the man touched Lily. Harry would sacrifice himself a thousand times over for her. Simon it was.

He made his way down the steps and towards the boy's dorm. Outside the fourth year's door he cast a spell and saw that there were three people in the room. He turned the knob and swung the door open. Simon and his two friends looked up and their faces grew pale.

"Boys..." he said carefully.

"Professor Potter," Simon came to himself, "Let me explain."

"Leave us," Harry commanded and the two friends couldn't wait to get out of the room. They stumbled past without a glance back at their popular friend.

Simon swallowed and put a bed between himself and Harry; his whole body shaking.



Harry's green eyes glittered with malice. The cold, murderous rage that he'd been bottling up was slowly breaking free.

He drew his wand and shut the door.

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A/N - NO!! this is not a Dark Harry story - don't worry.

## Chapter 18

### In the Mind of Madness

'Tis an old tale, and often told; But did my fate and wish agree, Ne'er had been read, in story old, Of maiden true betray'd for gold, That loved, or was avenged, like me!

Sir Walter Scott

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The door slammed shut behind Harry, and Simon, looking for any escape route, ran for the bathroom. Harry, not to be barred or deterred from his path, flicked his old worm wand and smirked as Simon ran face first into the sturdy wooden door that had suddenly closed on him. The boy staggered to his feet and lurched behind a bed.

"Professor...please. I had to break up with her! Don't you think this is kind of drastic?" the boy implored.

Harry felt a twitch at the boy's naivety. That this was due to some failed teen romance was flat out absurd.

"Mr. Dottingham," his voice caressed the name like a creeping death that stole up on someone unawares, "You've been a bad boy..."

Simon gulped and his eyes flickered a moment towards his trunk. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, sir."

"What did you think of my house? My home as you opened the door for your Grandfather?" His steps were slow and measured. Each one causing that tell-tale shiver in Simon, which shouted someone about to collapse in fear.

Simon's eyes widened and he backed quickly into a corner and half reached for his wand. "I-I..."

“What’s wrong Mr. Dottingham? I’m sure someone of your social standing in school would brag about having seen Harry Potter’s workroom. Don’t you want to tell me what you thought of it? Compliments? Criticisms?” He drew up along side Simon and pressed his wand tip under the boy’s chin.

Simon’s cocky confidence folded like a wizard tent and he closed his eyes, tears leaking out. “I had to,” he whispered, “My Dad...he would have hurt my Dad.”

“His own son? I doubt that.” Harry pressed a little harder, driving down the silent point that he would do best to reveal every nasty little detail about the betrayal.

“I couldn’t take the chance! Dad always said Grandfather was ruthless. That he’d do anything to get what he wants!”

Harry knelt down so that he was eye to eye with the young man. His face was so close that the stale smell of champagne and chocolate on his breath was obvious to Simon. Harry’s rage leaked into his magic and the tip of his wand heated to a small smolder and burned the bottom of Simon’s chin in a perfect little circle. Simon grunted from the pain and his lips trembled.

“Please...,” he begged pitifully, “don’t hurt me...”

Harry grabbed the boy by the front of his robes and lifted him off the ground. Simon gasped as Harry banged him roughly against the wall and some picture frames on a near by bed stand toppled over and broke.

“I’m not to be fooled by a clever tongue and lies like Lily. I saw your smile. I saw how... pleased you were to help out. I know your kind Dottingham. I saw it all my life here in school. A little Death Eater in training, only this time it’s the Council of Phyre instead. You blindly follow along with whoever seems to be the best choice at the moment, and don’t have a shiver of loyalty or regard for those you hurt. I’m amazed that the sorting hat put you in Gryffindor. Slytherin through and through you are.” Harry slammed the boy once more to vent his anger on someone readily available.

“Ow! Please! Oh, Merlin please!” The boy sobbed and pried at Harry hands.

“It’s not Merlin you should be praying to. It’s me!” Harry dropped the boy unceremoniously on the floor, where he crumpled into a heap. The pile of robes that was the boy seemed to move and scoot against the wall as Simon pulled his head out and groaned. Harry glanced to the door where he heard shouting and pounding, but no one was getting through that ward until he was ready to leave; which would be soon.

“You’re going to help me, Mr. Dottingham. Your blood is going to be the key to defeat your grandfather.”

“My-my blood?!” If it was possible for Simon to grow paler, he did. He was almost as white as a fresh pressed hospital sheet. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly, like a wooden string puppet in a carnival shows. Harry found it extremely amusing.

“Yes, your blood.” He pulled out a long gleaming knife and a glass vial. Simon gave a pitiful whimper reminiscent of a wounded puppy. Harry felt another one of those twinges that was his conscious. That nobility that people everywhere always said he had was long gone now. It was time for action and the loosening of all restraints.

As he knelt down and reached for the boy, who was now immobile with fear, another jolting twinge settled into his chest. It was the bond. The bond to Sirius that was wrenching at his soul, and Harry paused to reflect this turn of events. It was unexpected and problematic. Problematic? Unexpected? Since when did he think with such cold calculating words? Troublesome and annoying was more his style.

His breath caught as he pondered the strange shift in his thoughts and he caught his reflection in the silver blade. His eyes weren’t his. They could have been put on the face of any Death Eater. There was only word for how he looked. Cruel.

Not wanting to see such despicable things anymore he shut his eyes quickly, only to have them snap back open when he felt Simon

moving. The boy froze in the half reach for his wand, which was poking out from under the bed.

“Don’t kill me...” His plea was so soft and calm, innocent and youthful that it rocked Harry to the core. What was he becoming? What was he willing to do for Lily? The answer was anything.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered back and threw his doubts away. The knife flashed and Simon’s scream was cut short.

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“SIMON! SIMON! DON’T YOU HURT HIM!” The voices on the other side of the door cried out, occasionally followed by a bellow of a spell that did nothing. It all stopped as the latch was thrown and the door opened. The entire gaggle of fourth years and some fifth years were outside and they all fell silent when they saw Harry tucking away a knife. One of the boys, Simon’s room-mate, braved the danger and pointed his wand at Harry.

“What did you do to Simon?” The boy demanded with authority. Harry smiled inwardly at the loyalty and bravery shown in such unknown circumstances. Here was a true Gryffindor.

“Don’t point your wand at me, Simmers. I’ll break it in two.” Harry snapped. He hated wands pointed at him. It was very annoying.

“Then show us Simon! You better not have done anything!”

Harry raised a brow, but relented his little show and dragged the moaning boy into the doorway.

“Simon!” Simmers said with relief and lowered his wand. “Are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

“He cut me!” Simon cried out and lifted up his hand to show a bleeding thumb, then moaned again.

Harry rolled his eyes. “By Merlin’s saggy bottom, you’re not gonna bleed to death. Stop your whimpering.”

The boy started to glare up at his Professor but apparently thought better of it, all things considered. Ignoring the students who started to badger the pair with questions, Harry marched the two of them down to the common room. Simon, by the scruff of his neck.

Harry looked around and spotted the one he wanted. "Marc." he said and the boy looked up from hanging his head. Obviously he didn't care what happened to Simon or he would have been on the stairs as well.

"Yes, Professor?" he asked politely, shooting a venomous stare at the boy in Harry's hands.

"Take Dottingham to the Headmistresses office. If he gives you any trouble, hit him with the nastiest hex you know. You have my permission. No curses though."

Marc perked right up and licked his lips with anticipation. "Is a Mummy Bind ok?"

Harry looked little shocked at that. "You know the Mummy Bind hex?"

Marc nodded eagerly. "Yeah! Lils-er-Lily taught it to me."

"Figures," Harry snorted, "That spell is fine. Move him along and use a few pinching charms on him to make sure he doesn't slow down. Give this to the Headmistress when you arrive." He handed over a thick envelope.

"What's it for?" he asked curiously as he tucked it away in a pocket.

"It's my recommendation for Simon Dottingham's expulsion."

The room got deathly quiet and the kid in question hung his head in shame. Even Marc seemed a little taken back by the declaration.

"Oh...ok. Umm, you'd best come along now." Marc shook off the surprise and lead Simon away with his wand. When the two were

safely outside of the Fat Lady's portrait, Harry rounded on the students who were moping around.

“This evening, Mr. Dottingham assisted a group of Dark Wizards in the theft of a dangerous magical item from my house in Hogsmead. The said wizards also assaulted my daughter and injured her. If anyone knows anything about this or had any part to play in this crime you would do well to tell the Headmistress first thing tomorrow morning. Rest assured that I will find out if anyone else was involved. If you turn yourselves in the most you will face are some detentions. If I have to find out by other means, you may face the same penalty that Simon might have coming to him. Make the smart choice. Speak to Professor McGonagall.”

The students that were gathered started to whisper to each other. Harry swept his gaze around once more, then turned with a flourish of his robes and strode out of the room. He felt for the vial of blood in his pocket. His rage was bottled once more and he had a full night ahead of him.

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Jeremiah Simon Dottingham sat in his bedroom. He was sitting snugly in his favorite leather chair; the kind that you almost fall into. A thick manuscript was opened in his lap and every now and then his fingers would turn a page and his brown eyes, thoughtful behind a pair of rimless glasses, would scan the words.

He was in publishing. No particular field, just anything that had the potential to make money. He was currently reviewing a rather dull and monotone book on magical plants that the author hoped would become a standard textbook or reference guide for students. It wouldn't. At least not by his publishing house.

His company published very few books and articles. Maybe two or three a year. The ones they did take up however; were elite. They were small. A staff of maybe twenty people; each paid reasonably well for their efforts. The company didn't bring in much money, but they had the name and prestige to make or break almost any up and coming author.

Jeremiah sighed and threw the bound papers aside with a snort of disgust and ran his hand through his salt and peppered hair. "Another night wasted with a piece of rubbish," he muttered to himself and reached over to take a sip of brandy.

He settled into the chair for a bit, fully intending to spend another night of sleep in its embrace. His wife Marie had went ahead to Sweden to prepare their winter house for the holiday break. He hated sleeping in an empty bed, so he had been spending the late nights sipping bourbon or brandy until he fell into a contented sleep in the chair.

He mulled over his glass, idly falling into the same rhythm of self pity at the absence of his wife and son as he had the past five nights, when the lights flickered and went out. All of a sudden he found himself plunged into darkness and he grabbed his wand while cursing profusely. Spell lit candles and lights rarely went out... in fact they almost never did.

"Bicken!" he called out to his house elf, the only one that refused the offer of freedom that had deprived his household of workers. "The lights, Bicken! The lights! What the bloody hell have you done?" he waited. "Bicken? Answer me!"

"He can't," a voice said from behind him.

Jeremiah jumped and turned around, wand raised. "Lumos!" The light fell on a man, a legend, which he thought he'd never see: Harry Potter. Jeremiah lowered his wand a fraction and looked past the man and towards the corners. No one else was here, thank Merlin.

"Mr. Potter. This is unexpected and most unordinary. Is everything alright with Simon?" he was unnerved by the presence of his sons Professor. And slightly more uneasy that the man had used stealth to break into his house.

"Yes... at least in the sense that you mean. Your son did something tonight. Something... unforgivable. He is facing expulsion." Harry said with that stern mask he had been practicing for many years.



“Expulsion?!” Jeremiah gasped, “What has he done?”

“He consorted with his grandfather.”

Jeremiah’s world stopped. Those simple, damnable words put Jeremiah into a heightened state of guard. He had fled that part of his life over twenty years ago, but one does not forget such things. Nor do they not expect some haunting of the past to come calling on a lonely dark night.

Well it was dark, he was alone, and the haunting had come calling.

“His... grandfather?” he licked his lips and began to think of some spells to use in this situation.

Harry’s neutral expression grew dark. “You know what I am talking about Mr. Dottingham. D’Arthy told me everything.”

‘Shit,’ he thought. They held each other’s eyes. Each trying to gauge what the other was thinking or planning. Harry’s seemed to gleam something better.

“Don’t do-” Harry began to warn, but suddenly spun around and down behind a couch as a cutting curse flew by and bit into the soft wood of a book shelf. He really wasn’t in the mood for this, since he had a limited amount of time to do what he needed to.

“Get out of my house!” Jeremiah screeched like a baritone banshee. Harry smirked behind the padded cloth and furniture.

“I’ll be happy to... just tell me where to find Irium.” Harry was answered by a desk flying towards him from off to the side. He absently pointed his wand and the heavy oak burst into kindling.

“I spent the better part of two decades trying to leave that part of my life behind me, Potter. I’ll not be dragged back into it by the likes of you!”

Harry snarled. He rolled out from behind the couch and sent a globe of frost fire across the room. The pale shifting spell sphere exploded against a shield and the liquid splattered across the walls and floor, freezing everything it touched.

The duel began in earnest. The son of Irium, it turned out, was no slouch at magic or in dueling. Harry mused that being the son of the so called 'Prime', would need a bit of magic to survive.

The dark room lit up with the glow and flashes of spellwork. Bangs, thumps, roaring, springs and other sounds drone out the moans and struggling breaths of the two men as they labored to win. Chairs and walls crumbled, lanterns turned into odd beasts and animals to attack on command, only to be met with something larger and fiercer. The shattering and crackling of shield spells met severing curses. Fire raced up the walls and sometimes robes, as gouts, like a spewing volcano, exploded near the men.

They began to close in on each other. The wands dipping and diving; twirling and flicking; thrusting and waving. Back and forth the curses, charms and hexes came. Sometimes being blocked, sometimes shielded, most of the time prudently dodged.

Harry ducked through a doorway and behind a wall as a blasting curse shattered part of the staircase. He felt something wet trickle into his eyes and he reached up to wipe the sweat away, only to find blood on the back of his hand. 'Scalp Wound,' he thought. 'They bleed a lot.'

"Episkey," he muttered and dragged the tip of his wand along his forehead, sealing the cut closed. It was a momentary lull as right next to his head a hole suddenly appeared. He looked at it incredulously before running. Every other step a new hole was blasted through, like chain fire following his movements.

Harry turned a corner and dived forward to avoid the yellow tinged spell zooming towards him. Jeremiah had apparated into the hallway to ambush him. He came up from the roll and waved his wand around like a madman.

“Glacialus!” he yelled and a multiple blue globes fell from his wand.

“Protego!” Jeremiah replied and blocked one of them, but the four others hit the walls floor and ceiling around him. He cried out as some of the liquid hit his upper-arm and felt the icy burn of the charm freeze even the veins under the skin. He turned to run, but slipped on a patch of slickness behind up and fell to the ground.

He rolled to the side to avoid a stunning spell and shot another blasting spell back in return. He smirked as Harry’s hastily erected shield, that wasn’t strong enough, and he tumbled through the air to drop with a sticky thump. He had to get out of here before the Ministry came. They would pull every deadly secret out of him and condemn him to death by The Council.

He got to his feet and apperated up to his bedroom. He needed a few things first. He heard Potter scream out his name in rage from below as he began searching the house. Simon would get an earful for fetching that dog on him that was for sure. He’d battled plenty of times in his life, even against a few Death Eaters who thought him a simple editor; but he’d never faced someone so... singularly focused on victory before. Those damn green eyes did half his work for him, they were so intense. It was like they were calculating hundreds of ways to kill or maim you. No doubt, no fear, just an assurance that he only had to choose a way and you’d be his.

He tucked a small case and a heavy silver pocket watch into his torn robe. The last thing he needed was his diary. He couldn’t let that fall into Potter’s hands. His father would kill him himself if he ever found out, and Jeremiah had no doubt that he probably would. He went to the nightstand and pulled open a hidden compartment the revealed the leather bound pages, dusty from misuse, to greet his familiar eyes. He stroked the book fondly before putting it into yet another pocket. Then he turned and apperated just as Harry ran into the room and shot out a spell.

“Damnit!” Harry cursed at the escape. He looked around the room and saw that his foe had quickly ransacked it for anything incriminating. Harry wasn’t here for anything but blood, so he cared not. He reached into a pouch at his side that held an undetectable

extension charm. He had browbeat Hermione into making him a couple a few weeks ago. He could do some fairly impressive magic, but that damn charm gave him no end of headaches.

He pulled out a mirror and the vial. He had used three drops already; and he only had enough for one more spell. He drew a pentagram on the floor with his wand and laid the mirror in the center. He cut into a scabbed over wound on his thumb and rubbed his own blood along the frame. It hissed and faded into the tarnished silver, making the dull grey gleam like new. The reflective surface seemed to ripple and the ceiling faded away. It was as if it reflected nothing, but still had that glassy sheen to the surface.

Harry held the vial over the mirror and intoned the Dark Magic. "Et Cognatus tu Fateus, Concero nost Utroque," a drop of Simon's blood fell on the mirror and vanished. "Et Cognatus to Fateus, in Promptu Ponere Locus." He poured the rest onto the flat plane and the surface turned crimson and cloudy.

Like a bottled thundercloud it rolled inside the mirror, arced lightning hid behind the glass, the red glaze growing darker and darker by the moment until it was nothing but black. Then it gradually grew brighter and brighter; the darkness falling away to reveal a picture. A salt and peppered-haired man walking towards a winter enclosed cottage. Harry turned the mirror to and fro to get a better idea of the surroundings. A mountain range was in the distance and a small dirt road, icy and patched with snow, ran abreast of the home. Harry didn't know where it was, but he had the picture in his mind.

He vanished the mirror and vial and stood up. He twisted quickly and felt the familiar pressure, like being squeezed through a keyhole and was pulled through nothingness to arrive with a loud pop, behind the walking Jeremiah. Harry raised his wand as the man spun around in surprise. A loud snap and some ropes flew out from the end of Harry's wand. Jeremiah was too quick though and had jumped to the side into a hill of snow. He returned a bone-breaking curse that narrowly missed Harry's head.

Harrow's eyes narrowed hatefully, "Persercus!" and he savagely slashed his wand.

An ugly purple line flashed and Jeremiah cried out. He fell to his knees in shock and held up his wand arm. His hand and wrist were missing, cleanly severed from his arm. Blood gushed and pumped in squirts with the beat of his heart, coloring the snow around him turned bright red. His mouth worked soundlessly as he stared in shock. The missing limb was lying several feet away, twitching and fingers still gripped tightly around a wand.

Harry stepped forward and stepped on Dottingham's chest, grinding his heel in a bit painfully. "Don't go throwing around using lethal curses unless you can play with the big boys." He cast a silencing spell when it looked like Jeremiah was about to find his voice again.

Harry produced another glass vial and grabbed the injured arm. He held the tip against the wound, filling the container to the brim with the stolen blood. He then tapped the wound in several places with his wand and concentrated. A narrow beam hit the wound and then slowly widened and faded away. A semi-translucent sphere encased the injury and the blood flow stopped.

"Now listen closely Dottingham. I've put a stasis field around the wound, but it won't last long. Maybe fifteen minutes at most. You've got that much time to get to a healer. I don't suggest telling people what happened here though. If the Ministry found out who you were... well, things could get questionable for you, wouldn't they? Get your hand put back on and forget all about this and maybe if you're lucky you can run away with your son and disappear."

Without another word Harry apparated away. Like he had used Simon's blood to find his father, he would use Jeremiah's to find Irium.

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Ginny watched the young girl across from her through narrowed eyes. It was a hard read. A very hard read. Her eyes didn't flicker or waver in their glare, her hands were steady, she didn't bite her lip or swallow excessively, and her breathing remained measured and normal. What the hell was this girl thinking?

Lily on the other hand was having just as hard a time as Ginny. She couldn't seem to focus on the other parts of the woman across from her. That glare; that penetrating stare; drew all attention to the eyes and she couldn't get any read off the woman's body language. She had to do something. Something quick or she would be 'up the creek' so to speak.

"Well?" Lily broke the silence. "Are you just gonna sit there and stare at me? I mean I know you envy my hair and all, but I'm sure if you did... something... with yours it wouldn't look so bad."

Ginny pursed her lips and had to stop herself from reaching across the table and shaking the brat. It left a sour taste in her mouth to let a twelve year old run rough-shod and talk to her like that. She needed to be taught a lesson.

"Ok. Call." She pushed several liquorish snaps and a dozen Berty's Every Flavor jelly beans into the rather heavy pot.

"Ha!" Lily grinned triumphantly and laid down her cards. "Three Ministers! Beat that!" Sure enough three Ministers, a Witch, a nine and a five stared up at the redhead. Ginny's shoulders sagged and she gave a great sigh. Lily chortled and reached out with long arms to sweep up her winnings.

"Not so fast." Ginny said and Lily halted with a curious stare. "Good hand, but I think a flush beats three of a kind." she laid down her hand to show them all in the transfiguration suit. Lily's jaw slacked and she looked back and forth between the two hands.

"That's five times in a row! How'd you do it?" the younger girl cried forlornly and sat back as Ginny, with an evil grin, pulled the candy into her pile; which was now considerably larger than Lily's.

"Honey, I've been touring with the Quidditch League for years now and played against my older brothers since I was five. I've learned a thing or two." She shifted her sleeve a bit to make sure the hidden cards didn't slip out. Early on in the game she found out the only way to beat the little minx was to cheat.

“But I was doing so good!”

“‘Well’, you were doing so ‘well’,” Hermione corrected from a corner chair, having been knocked out of the game in the first seven hands. Ginny noted that Lily took great pleasure in that.

When they had gotten back to Harry’s quarters they had found the transfiguration professor pacing back and forth waiting for him. She had been contacted at the hospital and informed of the theft and had then rushed back to Harry’s house to find him gone. She then ran to Hogwarts and had been waiting in his quarters for ten minutes when the two girls arrived. Once she had calmed down and Ginny explained the situation; away from Lily so she couldn’t hear the details, they had decided to play a game of poker to pass the time until Harry’s return. Hermione was obviously concerned about Harry’s state of mind from the brief description provided, but she couldn’t say anything with Lily in the room.

Lily rolled her eyes and tried to ignore the correction in grammar. Content, instead to poke at what was left of her winnings. Two chocolate frogs, a fist full of snaps and a pile of jellybeans.

“How do you do it?” Lily asked while Ginny shuffled the cards. “How do you beat me so often?” her lips had turned into a cute little pout and she folded her arms across her chest.

Ginny gave a rueful chuckle. “I was letting you win the first rounds so I could find your tells. After that it was all over for you, I’m afraid.” She had read that rubbish in a book somewhere. It sounded nice.

Lily looked confused and even a little offended. “But Da-ahem, I was told that I didn’t have any tells.” Ginny and Hermione glanced knowingly at each other at the omission of Harry from all conversation so far.

“Everyone has tells.” Ginny replied sagely, trying to sound wise and adult-like. From the look on Lily’s face she was barely pulling it off.

Lily sighed and pushed all her candy into the middle. “I’m done. It’s getting kinda boring anyways.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Ginny broke into a relieved smile. “I hate poker.”

“Then why do you play?” Lily asked while taking a bite out of one of the frogs.

She shrugged. “We need something to do while we wait for Harry. One thing’s as good as another I guess.”

Ginny leaned back and stretched out with a great yawn, squinting her eyes closed. When she opened her eyes, she saw Lily’s dart away. Was the girl studying her? She wasn’t sure what she saw in that brief look. Was it... hope? Ginny’s stomach did back flips at the thought. What was Lily looking for from Ginny? If it was a mother figure, Ginny didn’t want to do that. Couldn’t do that, regardless of what she told Harry. She could deal with a kind of big sister type role; but mother? She’d sooner shag that greasy fat announcer from the Cannons.

Deciding to pretend she didn’t see anything, she summoned a bottle of butterbeer and cast a light chilling charm on the bottle. As she sipped the frosty cold drink she almost laughed as she saw Hermione looking at Lily with ‘that’ look.

Lily had moved over to the window and hopped up on the sill. She was staring absently out into the night while chewing on the ends of her hair. She had a slightly lost and confused look. It was a mixture of anger, hurt, callous, and fear. She looked like she wasn’t sure what to feel and was trying to feel them all, but she could no longer determine what was what so she had settled on a depressed and shallow look to cover up the other emotions.

Ginny furiously pushed down the motherly instinct that she inherited from her mum. She looked over to Hermione, who was watching the girl carefully. That calculating mind accessing, processing and formulating all in a glance. It was a curse at times to be so damn smart, Ginny thought.

“Lily,” Hermione said, dropping her usual formality, “Don’t you have a charms essay due tomorrow?”



She frowned and gave an irritated glance at the Professor, "I'll get it done."

"Why don't you get it done now, while there isn't anything to do. Ginny and I are here to help you, so it's for the best." Hermione insisted in that 'brook no nonsense' tone of hers.

Lily huffed and blew at her bangs, causing that one stray one to flutter out of her eyes. "I said I'll get it done."

"You'll get it done now."

"You're not my mum!" Lily snapped, her eyes glinting dangerously, "Can't I even decide when I'll do my homework?"

Ginny smiled into her drink. The girl had a temper and wasn't afraid to speak her mind. Spunky. Hermione, however, tilted her head and met the anger with a calm, tired smile.

"Lily, I know you're worried about him, its ok. I just thought it would be a good idea to take your mind off of your father for the moment."

"He's not my father," the girl said mulishly and folded her arms.

Ginny rolled her eyes and slammed the bottle on the table. "Are we back to that again?"

"And what if we are? He just adopted me... if he was my real Dad he wouldn't hurt me."

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other and started to laugh. Years of memories, for the both of them, danced through their minds at the absurd statement. They finally stifled their mirth as best they could when they noticed the outraged and highly offended Lily, tapping her foot impatiently.

"Lily," Ginny began, doing her best to hold back a chuckle, "All fathers do something stupid. Quite often, in fact. I can't count the number of times my Mum or Dad said or did something hurtful. That's the thing about anger, sweetie. When you lose it people get hurt."

“Right. A good family forgives and forgets,” Hermione butted in with a cliché.

Lily gave a skeptical twist of her lips. “I’m still going to hold him to that promise.”

Ginny blinked and frowned. “Surely not, Lily. That won’t help anything.”

“It will help me!”

“What promise?” Hermione asked, trying to butt in.

“No it won’t, Lily,” Ginny continued, ignoring Hermione. “The only thing it will do it make you feel vindictive for a few days, then you’ll feel horrible.”

“What promise?”

“I won’t feel horrible. I’ll feel relieved that he won’t be around looking over my shoulder or shaking my brains out when he gets mad at me.”

“Excuse me?” Hermione interjected forcefully and both girls looked over towards the brown-haired mother.

“What?!” They both snapped at the same time.

Hermione quirked a brow and pursed her lips. “What promise?”

“Lily here thought it would be a grand idea to make Harry promise he would quit Hogwarts and go back to Hogsmead.”

Hermione gasped and looked at the smug twelve year old. “You really wouldn’t do that would you?” Lily shrugged and pulled up her bag to dig out her homework. “Why you little-”

Lily looked up quickly. “Little what?”

Hermione schooled her self before she said something mean. "Lily, we really need him here. I need him here. My husband is waking up tomorrow and might be back home within the week. Soon I'll be back at Hogwarts and I'll need Harry to help me out here. The Headmistress can't run the school and teach at the same time, and I can't continue the Defense class. Harry wouldn't break his word to you about this. Please don't make him."

Lily looked like she was going to insist for a moment, but then a curious expression came over her face. Slowly it morphed into a sly and cunning smile that set both Hermione's and Ginny's, hair on ends. The girl was up to something devious.

"I might be...persuaded, to forget about the whole thing and let him stay."

"I sense a 'but', coming on here." Ginny said and took another sip.

Lily smirked and flashed her pearly whites. "I'd say a break from the mid year exams and having all my detentions forgotten would do it for me."

Hermione looked scandalized. Like the girl had just burned a copy of Hogwarts: A History. "What? That's outrageous! That's blackmail! You can't be serious."

Lily sat down at the table and gave a falsely innocent smile. "It's not blackmail. You're bribing me to forget about a Professor assaulting a student."

Ginny and Hermione stared at each other in astonishment. Lily proceeded to dig out the previous mentioned charms essay that was half finished and waited while the two women decided what to do. Ginny gave a tug of her head towards the bedroom door and Hermione got up. Together they vanished into the room to talk about the situation.

"Hermione, she does have a point."

“Harry, assaulting a student? Come now, Ginny. You can’t be serious.”

Ginny gave a nod. “I am. Harry was furious. He shook her up right good. It’s his daughter I know, but if it were another student, he’d be in danger of getting fired, wouldn’t he?”

Hermione fidgeted and bit at her cheek. “Was it really that bad?”

“Yeah. Just give her what she wants. You remember what it was like when we were that young.”

Hermione looked at her blankly for a moment.

“Err, ok maybe you don’t. The point is she is looking for a way to back down from what he said. She doesn’t want him to leave, not really, but she doesn’t just want to forgive him either. This way it will seem like she got something worthwhile out of it and allow him to stay.”

“I don’t know...” Hermione looked unconvinced.

“Hermione. Its just some detentions and some tests. It’s a small price to pay to keep Harry here, wouldn’t you agree?”

Hermione sighed in defeat and gave a reluctant nod. “It’s just... It seems so wrong for some reason.”

Ginny laughed and hugged her best friend. “Just go out there and agree. Then go see Rosey. You’ve barely spent any time with her. I’ll floo when Harry gets back.”

Hermione shook her head. “She’s sleeping by now. I can’t wake her up just to see me.”

“Then crawl into bed and sleep next to her. You need it, hun. Badly.”

Hermione sighed and looked at the clock. It was late. “Maybe that’s not a bad idea. Will you be alright here with Lily?”

Ginny waved the question off. "I'll be fine. I'll help her finish that charms essay then I'll kick her into bed."

She laughed. "She might just kick back."

Ginny gave a vicious little grin. "I've just as much fire in my belly as she does and I've beaten down six brothers, hundreds of chasers, dozens of beaters and one Boy-Who-Lived. I can handle her."

Hermione gave a most unladylike giggle. "I think you just might be able to. Ok let's go give the little terrorist her demands."

They shared a hug and walked back into the room. Lily was scribbling away at her parchment, looking over her notes and the large charms text next to her. Ginny saw that she had a small secret smile, barely tugging at the corners of her lips. She'd known that they would give in. Ginny felt a little thrill at the prospect of teaching the girl a lesson or two. She'd show her what a real brat was like.

Then, maybe, she'd find out the root cause of the girl's trouble and tell Harry. Then he'd handle it and she could wash her hands of the whole messy business and go back to just being his girlfriend. She just wasn't ready for anything more. Not with another war on the horizon.

Brooms, Quaffles, and Snogs. That summed her up pretty well.

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'And where the offense is, let the great axe fall.'

William Shakespeare

The mountain looked like any others. Towering and majestic; snow capped and hard lines of jutting, angular rocks. Sweeps and planes in no discernable pattern and unseen nests of falcons and other dangerous beasts. It was absolutely beautiful.

Harry noticed it not. To his eyes; narrowed and slightly afire with madness, the mountain was sinister. The angular rocks looked like broken and rotted fangs and teeth. The birds were like flies, buzzing around a corpse. The snow capped peak was a red haze from his thudding heart and racing emotions, looking like nothing more than a wound leaking blood.

A face it was. Torn, battered, bloody and broken. Thomas's face. He was there, nestled somewhere in its cavernous depths. The council, the book, would be there as well. Prudence would guide a sane person to call for help. Sanity would say to abandon such suicide and find another way. To find another way would be to let go of revenge and find comfort in forgiveness. At this moment, for an act that violated a sanctity that Harry had held above all else; forgiveness wasn't an option. That was between Thomas and God. It was Harry's job to arrange the meeting.

He saw the opening; a groomed path, well worn by the repeated treks of man. It snaked around boulders to vanish in the darkness. His wand hand was twitching with need. A desperate yearning to sate this awful addiction that was driving him this night. Sparks eagerly sauntered from the tip of his wand. White wisps of wild magic flickered across his body, lighting the darkness with each tiny burst and casting Harry into the role of a pale and dark clad monster.

He felt them. The wards and protections. Layer upon layer of defense. Some old and powerful, others feeble and weak. He couldn't take them all down in time. That could take weeks and he wanted it now. Damn the truce. Damn Irium. Damn the book and most of all; Damn Thomas. Harry wanted blood. Whether it was Thomas's or his own would soon be determined.

He raised his wand and in the immortal words of the famous playwright, William Shakespeare. He let the axe fall.

"Destructo!" His voice twisted with a feral tone around the dark spell. A Purple bolt, laced with cords of black lighting, raged out across the night. Its path was like a falling meteor. The ground was churned and

ripped apart in its wake. Boulders were pulverized into fine grains of sand. And when it struck the shields, it struck hard.

A colossal explosion of energy and magic brought a brief wondrous dawn in the night. Colors raced and changed like a rainbow ripple, from where the spell struck the shields. A watery effect that faded the farther it left the epicenter.

“Destructo!” He incanted again, with even more force. Its wake was now a river bed. A two foot deep valley, smoking with heat. Even the soil and bits of grass it contained, on fire.

This time, along that rippling tide of magic, tiny cracks appeared. Like safety glass struck by something heavy and strung. A splintering. The deep gong of magic against magic played like the bells of the Vatican. Reverberating up the mountainside and deep into the forest. Owls took flight, and families of deer and packs of wolves raced to safety; far from the loud and offensive noise.

“THOMAS!” Harry screamed out his demand. “Destructo!” His wand bucked yet again from the force. His most powerful spell. This time there was no rippling or gong sound. There was a shattering like a sheet of glass. Huge chunks of the broken magic fell away; falling apart like glittering stardust.

“Mr. Potter,” A voice weary and regretful called from the mouth of the cave. Harry paused in his next cast and waited. Irium walked out with carefully measured steps. His gold, shimmering robes a stark contrast to the blackness behind him. His wand, a long and thin device, calmly at his side. Pointed away, but no doubt ready for anything.

“Lord Irium, I presume?” Harry stated; his voice naked with malice.

Irium’s head turned to study the path of the obliteration spell that Harry had cast. A shameful clucking sounding from his hidden, smoky, face. “Quite the temper I see... An impressive, and if I do say so myself, awe-inspiring display of magic. You could rise quickly in our ranks. Perhaps even hold my spot when I retire.”

"Thomas," was all Harry could say to the ridiculous offer.

"Ah." Another great sigh. "The memory charm then?"

"Yes. Give him to me."

"What you ask is quite improbable. As I said, we police our own." A sharp wicked spell flashed by his head. "But not impossible. It is up to him to decide if he wishes to meet your challenge. But no more spell hurling or threats, Mr. Potter. I let that go because when it comes to our children, we are all allowed a little lax in judgment. As your being here so ably demonstrates. But rest assured, I am more than able to bring you to heel should you threaten me again."

Harry's grin turned into something nasty. "Then perhaps you'll excuse me if I got a little... carried away with Jeremiah."

Silence. The dark silence and stiff form was all Harry needed to tell that he had struck a nerve.

"What did you do, Mr. Potter?" Irium asked after a long moment. Behind him five figures in silver came out and arranged themselves.

"It's not what I did, but what will happen... soon. I hear Pitterfalf cemetery is a very nice place for wizards..." Harry was taking a gamble here, but then again they usually paid off.

"You... you wouldn't..."

"I would." They studied each other for a long moment; finally one of the five, none of them with the bulky form of Thomas, stepped forward a bit.

"Just kill him, Reverence. He's too much trouble to let live. He even found us for Salem's sake!"

Irium seemed to ponder that for a moment. "Yes, Mr. Potter. Let's put our discussion of Jeremiah on hold for a bit." So the council didn't know he had a son Harry mused. "How ever did you find us? This place should have been unplotable. Absolutely hidden."



“You should have used the Fidelus charm.”

“The Fidelus charm? I’m afraid that is a rare and relatively unknown spell that is privy to only a select few, mostly of English nationality. None of us here were able to procure knowledge of its casting. We tried, but it seems to be jealously guarded. I take it from your evasive answer that you will not divulge the means of your tracking?”

Harry snarled with impatience. “Enough babbling. Give me Thomas or I tear you apart here and now.”

Irium’s stance seemed to suddenly radiate menace and lethality. “I told you, Mr. Potter. I don’t take kindly to threats. Especially not by upstart wand wavers who think they can throw a decent curse or two. You have stated your terms; now let me make something clear in that rather bloated head of yours. Your life has been protected so far because you hold an honorary place at our table. Rebel or not. Your actions allowed us entrance into the Pyramid. You stole part of the book, that is true, but in the purest form of the traditions you had the right to see its works first. You set everything into motion. Allowed the Council of Phyre, for the first time in eons, to shake the dust of ages from our slumber and once more, move through the world as a power. All because of your actions. All-your-fault.”

Harry will wavered a bit as his guilt and self pity threatened to overwhelm his hatred and thirst. Irium certainly knew the right points to pick.

“So like I said, Mr. Potter. Your life has been spared. Many were the times we could have just killed you or your friends. We spared you and them out of gratitude. Do not threaten me. I am stronger than you know.”

Harry felt like laughing at the absurdity of it all, and indeed he did. “Me? An honorary member of a group I’ve been working for years to bring down? Give me a break. I’ve met your kind before. A new look, a new name, but the same goal. Power; and you don’t care who you hurt to get it.”

Harry couldn't move in time as a powerful bludgeoning curse hit him in his upper chest. He gasped as he slammed to the ground. The wind was knocked out of him and a long scrape, from gravel and rocks, rubbed his forearm raw and bloody. He rolled away and instinctively threw up a shield against an attack that did now come. He heard some amused laughter in the distance, but his head and vision still swam from lack of air.

When his lungs finally relaxed and he took a gulp of refreshing air he winced in pain. A broken rib. That hex had a good bit of power behind it. Harry hadn't fought someone that skilled since dueling with Dimplewat. He had barely noticed Iriums wand movement before the spell had struck him. Just from that one spell Harry could tell that, unless some of his outstanding Potter luck intervened, Irium would beat him in a duel.

He jumped to his feet and schooled himself to hide the pain from the broken rib. He changed his stance a bit and walked on the balls of feet towards the group. It would allow him to pivot and dodge better for when the spells came. He still couldn't back down. He would get to Thomas, even if it killed him.

"Mr. Potter. As an honorary member of the Council of Phyre, as traitorous as you are turning out to be, it is my duty to inform you that a lack of respect to the 'Prime', that is I, is often punished. By our rules, you have been warned."

"Your rules? Am I supposed to believe you lot have a code of conduct or something?"

"Of course. We are not anarchists, Harry. And we do not wish for global domination or any such impossibility along those lines. Traditions, rules, integrity. They are the foundation for any strong organization. We are no different."

"Then why did this mysterious 'Thomas' touch my daughter?"

"What?" a slender, silver clad figure growled out from the group. "You lie, Potter. None of us would degrade ourselves in such a manner."

“Lie, do I? Ask your ‘Reverence’ there. He saw it! He stopped it!”

“Is this true, Reverence?” The one figured to maybe be second in command stated with an edge of anger and disgust in his voice. Harry could sense a tenuous fracture in the power Irium held here. How to exploit it though, Harry hadn’t the foggiest.

“It is. He will be punished for it as well. Mr. Potter here is demanding to take matters into his own hands however. I informed him that we deal with breaches within the Council, and by council tradition he will be tried, but not by outsiders.”

“Fair enough Reverence.” The second said and stepped back.

For Harry though it all seemed to click. The hints. The slight fluctuations in tone. The constant reminders. Irium, for whatever reason, was guiding him in the right direction. For what Harry didn’t know. He had to play this out correctly. This was an amazing opportunity and he had to take it. He needed answers.

“Why are you still using your wands? Why aren’t you using the magic of the book to just strike me down with my own magic?”

The group just looked at once another. Harry wished he could see their expressions, but their body language screamed signs of confused. Irium, however, started to chuckle and shake his head in mirth. As if a child had said something funny.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

Irium reached through the grey mist hiding his face and made a movement as if to wipe his eyes.

“Is that what you think the book did? We wondered why you never used it against us. Our largest concern was that you would gather your friends and do something... unpleasant and powerful. If you thought the knowledge did that, then it explains your reluctance and lack of action.”

"I don't understand. It allows you to take over another wizard's core. I know it does."

"Your right. The technique is there. Hidden within its papyrus and ink."

"I don't understand."

"Ah, Mr. Potter. In your obviously vast studies, could you tell us Merton's law regarding the creation of spells?"

Harry answered instinctively; it was something Dimplewat drilled into him excessively. "That spell and result must be balanced in energy. If the result is stronger than the magic inherent in the spell or the caster, then the energy will be drawn from the greatest source until balance is met. Usually that of the life force of the caster since that is the first link in the magic."

"Excellent. A perfect answer. Smooth and simple. Now humor me for one more question. What is the magical law that governs living magic?"

Harry frowned and racked his brain for an answer. He knew a lot about magic now, but he didn't know that. He gave a reluctant shake of his head. "I don't know."

"Then allow me to explain. No magic, inherent in a sentient life, can be controlled without due cause. It can however be dampened, diverted, blocked or altered as long as Merton's law does not reduce the inherent link of the sentience."

Harry growled and shifted his feet in frustration. "What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"I suppose in the simplest terms it means that it is impossible for magic to take control of magic. There are of course inconstancies as you can control the magic inherent in inanimate objects and plant life. Let me break it down even further. A living beings magical core can not be controlled or turned against itself without the willingness of its owner."

“What? But the technique in the book breaks that law. That’s what makes it so dangerous.”

“It does not break the law. It is impossible, Harry. The book does not use a person’s magic against them. It allows multiple wizards to join their cores together.”

Harry tilted his head, distracted by the idea. “What good does that do as a weapon?”

Irium’s voice was fevered with wonder and passion. “Think Harry, think! Merton’s law! The spells energy must balance with the result or it kills you! Imagine ten, twenty, no a hundred wizards joining their cores! The spells they could cast without death! The wonders we can perform! The power we could wield!”

Harry’s heart was hammering hard. He could feel its beats threatening to burst from his chest. Indeed, what wondrous spells! Where Irium saw creation, Harry saw mankind’s true nature from years of study the Dark Arts. Harry’s words earlier to his class came back to haunt him.

‘There is no spell that can level a mountain, thank Merlin for that.’

Now there could be. Harry envisioned it. He saw the well meaning Wizards of ancient Egypt trying to create a magic that would allow true wonders and miracles, and they did it. But the power and magic quickly corrupted them. They began casting darker and darker spells. With the combined cores that darkness spread through all of them and they sank further and further. Faster and faster away from humanity. Instead of one killing curse he saw an entire city fall dead in an instant. Instead of a time turner he saw wizards truly upsetting the balance and changing the past mistakes of years and centuries. He saw weapons, vast and powerful. He saw fireballs as large as Hogwarts. He saw a blasting charm destroy an entire mountain. All they would need would be numbers. And for the power it would offer the numbers would flock in.

“That’s an abomination!” Harry gasped out in a hoarse and horrified voice. His vengeance, everything that led him to that cave, was falling away in the crisis he found himself in. It was worse than anyone could imagine. It would be like comparing a house-elf to a dragon if this magic got out.

“No, Mr. Potter. It is the future! A new era! Wizards flying without the need of a broom or a charmed object! Castles and cities in the sky! A whole new world of possibilities! We will not lose control of the magic like our founders did!”

“This is madness man! It’s not the magic they lost control of, but themselves! We aren’t ready for that kind of power yet! Your means to get it prove it! There will be nothing but destruction. Cities and wizards will be falling out of the sky, not floating in it! Your founders sealed it away because they saw that it wasn’t a new world it would usher in, but the end of it!”

Irium laughed then. Sadly, it was not the mad tinged laugh of the unthoughtful or demented. It was cool and amused. “No, Harry. This will not become a weapon, but a salvation. We shall control its use and knowledge. Anyone who wishes to perform the art on a grand scale shall have to seek us out. They shall pay for it handsomely as well. Entire Ministries will go bankrupt demanding our services and power. And we shall be like a father to protect them when needed and nurture their growth. And when they go astray we shall lead them back to the path.”

Harry ground his teeth. “Seems like world domination to me.”

“You are too short sighted my green-eyed friend,” Irium said. “You think in the simplest terms and assume the worst.”

A storm seemed to come up from no where and begin to circle the mountain. It was a vast monstrosity of rolling black clouds and sizzling bolts of lightning. Thunder rumbled like the deep and vast voice of a giant from the mountain top. Harry watched it with no little amount of anxiety and fear.

“Yes, Harry. It has begun. Our first great work of magic. I seem to be missing the grand designs. State your business Mr. Potter and then be on your way. We have things to attend to and have talked long enough.”

Harry closed his eyes. It was a gamble, what he wanted to do. He didn't know about their traditions or rules, but he was pretty sure they had something like it. Most Dark organizations like theirs did. Ones rooted from long ago. Steeped in the order of ages past.

“As a member of the council I challenge for the right of ‘Prime’.” He opened his eyes and stared at the now tense and silent figure in front of him. His five silver shadows started to whisper among themselves, but none seemed to cry out in protest. Could he be right?

“You, challenge me?” Irium hissed in anger. “You presume much, Harry Potter.”

“You said I was an honorary member of the council. Can you name another who has done more? You even said yourself that I could one day take your spot. Well that day is today. I challenge you, Irium.”

The man was angry. Very angry. He could tell by the shaking wand and the hissing of one who was breathing hard through clenched teeth. Harry felt another push was needed.

“Or don't you wish to avenge your dead son and grandson?”

Irium jerked as if he had been struck by a spell. He raised his wand and Harry was ready. As ready as he had ever been to duel.

“Reverence, you can not accept the challenge.”

“Stay out of this.” Irium snarled at his second. Harry felt sweat pour down his face. He had to find a way to face down Irium one on one.

“I can't, Reverence,” the second continued. “If he means to follow the forms, then he has made a claim against Thomas for wrongs committed. You have stated him a member. Outcast though he may

be; that claim must be honored first. Then he must wait a full year before making another.”

“Ah,” Irium’s anger deflated, “True. Very true. Well it looks like you get your wish, Mr. Potter.” He looked over his shoulder and nodded to one of the men. The figure ran off with a swirl of moonlit robes and Irium looked back. “Thomas is yours. If you are still alive after this is settled, leave Mr. Potter. Leave and do not come back. You will no longer be welcomed here, traditions or not.”

Harry wanted to scream with frustration and elation. Thomas or Irium? Revenge or Sacrifice? Sacrifice. Hadn’t he sacrificed too much already? His life was one long endless stream of them. His Parents, his schooling, Sirius, Dumbledore, Hedwig, Remus and Tonks, seven years lost with Ginny. Once, just once, he would be selfish and take something he wanted more than anything: Thomas’ life.

“Bring him,” Harry snapped and started to pace. Irium didn’t laugh or say anything. Indeed, he looked like he was eager to battle Harry as well. Well if he wanted a taste, Harry would be happy to oblige.

“He is not weak, you know...” Irium whispered.

“What?”

“Thomas. He is powerful, ruthless and skilled. I will be surprised if you last thirty seconds against him. Few can overcome his skill in... well you’ll see soon enough. Or maybe you won’t. You might be dead before you even realize you’ve lost.”

“There’s the dark wizard I’ve been waiting for. So eager and happy to kill.”

“And what of you, Harry Potter? You seem so eager to kill as well. Indeed you already have slain my grandchild and son. A child, taken away by your own hand. So... daaaark.” Irium dragged out the last word like a knife against bone.

Harry hesitated and let his mask fall for a bit. Irium straightened before laughing. “You didn’t did you? How very noble and ...



generous of you Harry. I'm not sure I can forgive you for the façade; we shall have to settle our accounts soon... very soon. However, they are alive and I thank you for thier lives. It's obvious you could have taken them."

"Simon said you could care less for them, only for what they can give you. Something tells me you weren't angry at the thought that I'd killed them, but at the thought that you lost a resource. Which is it, Irium? What's more important to you? Family or power?"

"Ah, that would be telling, Harry. I think you're far shrewder than we have given you credit for. I would prefer that you didn't know too much about me. What you've already gleamed from D'Arthy and others is remarkable. Did you know, Harry, that you're the first person outside the influence of the council to learn my name? That D'Arthy found out is stunning; but that you got a vampire to talk... well that takes some skill. You never cease to impress me."

"I'm delighted to be so entertaining." Harry replied through clenched teeth. What was taking so long? "What's taking so long?" he finally asked. "He should be here already."

"Temper, temper, Harry. You will need to be focused for this. This isn't punishment so much as a real duel. He won't bow down and offer his neck, nor will we interfere. I could order his execution, as I had planned, but you have stated your challenge and that must be met."

"I don't give a damn about your internal justice. I want his head!"

"Spoken like a true prodigy of the dark arts. Tell me, Harry. Did you use some dark ritual or spell to locate us? Have you finally lowered yourself off that cloud you've been standing on, to wade in the mud with the rest of us mortals?"

Harry's eyes glittered and his knuckles whitened from the grip around his wand. Irium seemed to notice and tilted his head.

"So you did... again, I'm amazed. And heartened! Even the great Harry Potter can fall to earth. You know, when we first came to

England we had never heard of you and this Voldemort character. But it seemed that you were such an intricate part of their history and society that we had to know more when we found out it was you who stole the book. The things we heard... You are like a god to these people Harry. People whisper and pray to your name. When they lay their babes down to sleep they pray for your blessing. When they marry, or do something kind, they do it in your name.”

Irium chuckled ruefully. “Harry, in all my travels and my studies, I’ve never heard a name spoken with more reverence except Merlin’s. You could kill all of Hogsmead and no doubt the rest of the world would say that you must have had a good reason and throw rose petals at your feet.”

“I kind of doubt that.” He had to doubt that. He wasn’t sure if he could take the kind of adoration that Irium was talking about. It was sickening if it was true.

“Ah, well here is your foe Harry Potter.” Irium stepped aside and the heavy set man was walking out, uselessly garbed in silver once again. It didn’t matter since Harry already knew what he looked like.

Harry didn’t know what he would feel at seeing the man. He expected hate and determination not this... blood thirst. This eagerness to hurt was so all encompassing, that hundreds of ways to hurt maim and kill, ran through his mind like a train. Everything about the man he didn’t know, he hated. His flabby walk, his bouncing belly. His thick sausage fingers; sweaty with what was probably grease. His broad shoulders and that thick knobby and twisted wand he carried. But worst of all: the absolute worst thing that finalized Harry’s plan to kill this man; was the confidence and amusement that came from his laugh when he drew up next to Irium.

“So, Potter’s here for a little payback. Don’t know what there is to pay me back for... I didn’t get a chance to have a go with the little whore.” He shrugged as if it was no matter. Harry’s face remained stony.

“Thomas. He has challenged you. He has the right concerning your crime. Deal with him quickly and then return to the circle. We have more to unlock and will need your aid.”

"Yes, Reverence. This won't take long." Thomas promised.

Irium turned and with a motion of his hand they all retreated back into the cave. Outside, a light slushy snow was just beginning to fall. Mixed with the warm air of thunderstorm above that circled the mountain top like a dark halo. Harry and Thomas watched each other. Each taking a measure of the other man. Each not impressed.

"You know," Thomas began, "When I first heard about you I pictured a tall, imposing, legend of a wizard. Not a scrawny, messy haired kid. I'm not sure what's more absurd; that you look the way you do and did what you did, or that you look the way you do and these people idolize you."

"I'm going to kill you." It was a silent, calm statement as sure of fact as the promise of a sunrise tomorrow.

Thomas scowled and his face twitched. "Try it then, boy."

Harry's wand spat out the vilest cutting curse he knew. Sectum Sempra. He put everything behind it, intending with one spell to rend the man from hip to neck, just like he had killed Kreacher. Harry's mind didn't fully process what happened next. The man stepped aside faster than Harry could see. How someone that large could move that fast was beyond Harry's knowledge. Then Harry felt himself flying. It was an eerie sensation. He rose over the tree tops, the air pressed hard against his face. His ascent slowed and then stopped. For one brief glorious moment he hung high in the air without a broom. Then he began to fall.

Panic gripped him. Thomas had used a well controlled flinging curse to try and make him fall to his death. Simple, effective, deadly... flawed. Harry tightened his body and right before he hit the ground he apparated and appeared behind Thomas. The apparation had stolen all the moment of his fall so it didn't come crashing back on him. His wand jerked and a blasting curse struck the man from behind. Or would have except the man had dodged again in the blink of eye.

Harry rolled away as an unknown spell struck out from under the sagging arm of Thomas's robe. The man had sent the curse from under his arm. Amazing aim. Harry suddenly realized that Irium was right. Thomas was a deadly adversary. He couldn't toy or hold back. He had to give it his all.

Harry stood and sent a flurry of curses, hexes and charms. A cutter, a fireball, and bone breaking curse. Dozens of tiny knives, thousands of shards of ice. A freezing charm, concussion spells, waves of blasting energy and even a tripping jinx. All for naught. Harry panted with the exertion, his ears ringing from the bangs, pops, and roaring of his spells. His eye-sight spotted from blinding colors.

Thomas stood there laughing. Every spell he had dodged. Not one bit of Harry's magic had touched him. The man wasn't even breathing hard. Harry gaped and shook his head, frustration and anger welling up inside him.

"Is that all Potter? Lousy aim."

And Harry was ducking and throwing everything he could into his shields. Rocks and trees exploded around him and bounced away from his full body shield. The earth turned to water and he fell in, only to apperate away and right into the path of a stream of fire that struck uselessly against his charmed robes. Harry waved his wand and the fire became a long block of ice that almost made Thomas drop his wand from the weight. Harry took his chance and sent another Sectum Sempra spell slicing through the air. This time he saw it. There was no other way to explain how the man had side stepped the spell, yet had moved almost the entire long block of frozen fire with him.

Harry understood, but was no less amazed. The man was apperating. Just a couple feet away from his spot. It was quiet too... barely a whisper. Such a simple, yet demanding tactic. Harry shook his head and marveled at the amount of concentration and control needed to apperate so quickly and so often, without splinching or giving away a sound. Masterful.

"So that's your trick is it? I can deal with that."

Thomas glared and the ice burst with a flare of magic. Harry covered his eyes, but felt a few cuts along his arms and hands. Nothing serious, just an irritant.

"We shall see, Potter." A hot, glowing chain twisted through the air. Coiling like a snake to wrap around Harry. He apparated some fifteen feet away and pointed his wand at the ground behind a tree. A small blue fire, no bigger than a handle appeared. Harry twisted and apparated yet again as a petrification spell struck the tree, turning it to stone. Again he was some twenty feet on the other side of Thomas and cast another blue flame, this time following it up with a sleeping charm, which missed of course.

Harry ducked and rolled behind a tree as Thomas apparated behind him and tried to remove his head from his neck. A flare of his shield told him that he almost succeeded. Harry dropped a spreading fire charm and vanished with a pop again. Behind a bush he dropped a third blue flame and then sent a wide slash of wind to blow through the grounds like a small hurricane. It was a distractive spell only.

His eyes scanned the darkness. The shadows deeper and more foreboding in the orange light from the fire that was growing across the ground. Harry raised his strongest shield, but it wasn't enough as an almost lethal blasting curse shattered it and struck Harry in the shoulder. He tumbled through the air and into a prickly set of bushes, screaming in anguish from the broken bone.

He gasped and apparated as best he could to a set of shadows some thirty feet away from where he landed. It was a good thing too, as a fountain of flame struck that would have left nothing but ash of Harry.

Panting with pain, he raised a shaky wand and pointed at his shoulder. He bit back a cry and the bone snapped in place and knitted together. Somewhat. It wasn't healed for good, but it would stop hurting a great deal and could handle movement. He would need to see a healer when he was through though.

Thomas was looking around calmly, as if this was just a morning warm up for him. Harry's eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted with

hate. The man would bleed. Harry apparated with a loud pop behind Thomas and dropped a fourth and final small blue flame. Four of them, each hidden from view. Harry played the apparation game and appeared behind Thomas who vanished just as quick. Harry twisted and apparated to the man's side as the curse passed through where he was.

Harry's spell clashed against the flinging curse and Thomas apparated yet again. Right where Harry wanted him. A broad wave of the wand, a muttered incantation and the plan was set.

Harry jumped to the side, avoiding the fire that streamed past. His face blistered from the heat, but that was about all. He sent a feral, almost manic gleam towards Thomas.

"Are you ready to die, bastard?" spittle flicked at the corners of Harry's mouth. Like a rabid animal ready to pounce for the kill.

Thomas gave a disgusting and almost childish laugh. "Haven't you given up yet, Potter? It's obvious that you cant-"

Harry's spell interrupted him. "SECTUM SEMPER!" He shouted with all his rage and slashed his wand diagonally through the air. Thomas gasped as he tried to apparate away, but couldn't. The weak ward that Harry had set up gave him all he needed. Just one spell.

Blood fountained up like a geyser from the fat body. The disguise faded away and his face was viewable for the first time. A stunned and confused look was on his pockmarked visage. He fell to his knees and looked down at his chest that was split open from shoulder to hip. He gave a wheezing crimson cough and toppled over; very dead. Blood poured from the wound like a hose. The last fluttering heart beats spewing forth the life from the body. The hot substance seeped into the earth, creating a slushy and thick mud.

Harry blinked and sagged a bit. His blood thirst sated at last. He walked over to Thomas and with a foot turned the head just so. The eyes were vacant and staring. Dead. Murdered. Harry thought he would feel good. That he would feel justified... avenged. He just felt tired and empty.

A sapping lighting bolt blinded him and he looked up. The thundercloud seemed to have moved further down the mountain. Crackling energies tipped the blackness and touched base against the towering rock. Harry felt the rising wind; he was out of time. He saw as much as felt the energies being drawn into the shields. All the damage he had done before was fixed and reinforced. The storm was getting closer and growing stronger with each minute. There was no way he would be able to take the wards and protections down in time. And if he did what then? If anything tonight had proved that the council wasn't weak, old or doddering. They were skilled and powerful. He couldn't take them all on and live. They would take him apart piece-meal.

He looked at the cave entrance for a long moment. He could feel, but not see Irium's eyes meeting his. They watched each other without view.

Harry flicked his wand and Thomas's body was flung towards the cave. It thudded against a barrier and fell down.

"Another body for your army, Irium!" he shouted out. "Expect more! I'll take your council apart one at a time till you face me! It's not over."

He waited for some reply, but he guessed the so called 'Prime', could care less, or didn't believe a word. Truthfully after seeing Harry's weak performance tonight Harry wouldn't have either. He gave a sigh and looked once more at the man he had killed. A monster in truth, but a murdered one none the less.

"Sirius..." a flash of light and the smell of burning air later and the Phoenix was perched on his shoulder. He looked up fondly to his friend. "I'm sorry... I had to do it. Can you forgive me?" Their eyes met and he sensed the forgiveness in them. Could he forgive himself though? He thought of Lily, sweet innocent, Lily. He guessed he could.

He reached out, petting his old friend and felt a peace settle over the bond and into his heart. The magical creature taking the burden from

his heavy shoulders. "Thanks, old friend," Harry muttered and reached out to take his tail.

"Let's go home. Take me to my office."

The fire twisted around them in a blinding second and with a puff of ash they were gone.

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A/N - The next chapter will be the end of Part 1. Part 2 will deal less with Lily and more with The trio and Ginny. You'll get to see a bit of Ron's abilities as an Auror and just how .. well amazing Hermione is. Well amazing in the way I'm going to write her. Especially in the Harry/Hermione duel. Which I'm just plain itching to write. Power/Creativity versus, Intelligence/Knowledge. Still a long ways away though.

Well, I have to finish up Chapter 19. So until then. REVIEW, REVIEW, REVIEW! I want 200 Reviews!



## Chapter 19

### Dawn's Fading

"Oi! Gerofff! I can bloody well walk on my own, damnit." Ron snapped while shrugging Harry's arm away.

"Well fine then! I was just trying to help. Be a prat!" Harry retorted.

"Ok, I will!" The best friends stared at each other mulishly, looking like they were an inch from trading blows.

"Honestly boys, can't you two grow up?" Ginny pushed her way between the two men in the doorway, accidentally stepping on Harry's foot.

"Ow!" Harry broke eye contact with Ron and sent an evil eye at his retreating lover. "You did that on purpose!"

"Did what?" she called back over her shoulder. Ron chuckled and punched his friend in the shoulder.

"Alright, mate," Ron threw a chummy arm around Harry's shoulder. "I'll let you carry me over the threshold. Just make sure the rest of the honeymoon is memorable!"

"Ugh! I think I lost my appetite." Harry shrugged him off and stepped into the cottage.

It had been two weeks since Ron had woken up in St. Mungos. Two weeks since that fateful night that the book was stolen. Two weeks and the School holiday had begun. Harry's house was still under serious magical probing by the Ministry, and the Burrow and Hermione's home weren't large enough to accommodate everyone. So they had pooled their resources and the entire Weasley family had rented a massive wooden cabin in the Swedish wilderness.

It was an impressive estate at the base of one of their great mountains. Just a few dozen miles away from a popular ski lodge; it was nestled in a vast expanse of tall pines and bordered cliffs. It was

expensive, it was breath-taking, and it was an escape from the troubles of home.

“Has anyone seen Lily?” Harry asked Fleur who was directing Bill on where to put the presents that were being unpacked.

“Oui,” Fleur said in that delicious Veela voice, “She izz in zee Parlor’ with Rose and Victoire. They are braiding zee ‘ittle one’s ‘air.”

Harry frowned and shook his head. He waded through the stacks of luggage towards the double sliding doors and took a peek through the crack. Lily was sitting in a pine green chair with Rose perched in front of her. Victoire, Bill and Fleur’s eldest, was sitting cross legged in front of them chatting about something. Harry couldn’t make out what. He quietly slid the door open and took a few steps inside.

“Unpacked are we?” he asked.

Lily peeked around the side of the chair and gave a nod. “Almost.” Her tone was casual and light. They had come to an uneasy détente with each other. There had been no new hostilities but despite that neither had wavered from their standoff. Harry was searching for a way bridge the gap that had grown between them, but couldn’t summon the words when they were alone. He wanted to tell her he was sorry for everything he had done, and to talk about things and learn how she really felt. But whenever he sat down next to her, his stomach clenched with fear and he stumbled out something awkward and incomprehensible. He was positive that she thought he’d gone round the bend. It was funny; he could face a dark wizard, a dragon, or a shiva with a shrug, but he couldn’t express his feelings to his friends or family. It didn’t make sense, one would think the former was much more frightening than the latter.

“What’s left?” he asked, freeze framing the picture of the three girls in his mind.

“Just my books. Me and Victoire are sharing a room.” She turned back to the braiding. It was a silent signal that she wanted to be left alone.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. He gave a nod and backed out of the room, sliding the door closed behind him. When he turned around he saw Hermione leaning against the wall. She was looking better than she had in months. Ron was ok and out of the hospital, Rose had come out of her depression and was loving and ecstatic as ever, and much to the student's chagrin, she would be returning to Hogwarts after the holiday.

"Still giving you the cold shoulder?" she asked knowingly from the expression on his face.

Harry sighed. "Yeah. Not sure what to say, or even how to begin."

She slid up next to him, gave him a brief hug and looped her arm through his. "You have a couple weeks. It'll sort itself out." She started to guide him away through the warm hallways of the cabin.

"I hope you're right. Where are we going?" he asked.

"Ron wants a game of chess since he hasn't had a chance to catch up with you yet. I mean you had just gotten back when he got hurt. I charmed a room to look like the Gryffindor common room. I thought it would be nice to do something like we used to."

Harry thought about that and gave her a look of wonder. "You're a marvel, Hermione. You know that? You really are."

She blushed and gave him a flattered smile. "Thanks..."

"Oi! Took you two long enough. What kept ya?" Ron asked when they finally made it to the special room that Hermione had made.

Harry smiled and shook his head faithfully. He took a seat across from his best friend and glanced at the chess board. "I haven't played chess in... well, since Hogwarts."

Ron gave a devilish little smirk and made his opening move. "I'll go easy on you."

Harry scoffed and they began their game. Hermione breezed over and sat on Ron's lap, sipping a glass of eggnog. They made small talk during the game, catching up on old times, talking about their careers, family and things they wanted to do for the future. As the minutes passed they relaxed into the atmosphere of their childhood. The crackling of the fire, deep red walls and the illusion of the dormitory stairs all helped to bridge the gap of years lost. Hermione even thought to place some of her hats around the room in remembrance of SPEW.

"So," Ron came out with the big subject out of no where, "you guys explained about the book, the Council and the theft... but what's gonna happen next? I'm going back on duty after the holidays. Would be nice to know what I'm facing."

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances. Truth be told, neither of them wanted Ron to resume his Auror duties but he wouldn't hear of it. Ron had waited patiently; when he asked, they changed the subject. When he pressed, they put him off and when he had cornered them, Harry had told him to wait till the holidays. His best friend, the reader of his mind, and one of his founts of his strength had once again given Harry the benefit of the doubt and backed off from his tantrums to give him what was needed: Time.

It was time to reward that trust with knowledge, as terrible as it was.

"What's going to happen next... is war," Harry said grimly. "Every trail the Ministry and I have followed has led to one thing: they've created a huge army of Inferni. How many we don't know, but from the mountain cave they abandoned we've found traces of thousands. Who knows how long they've been making the things."

"So I'm gonna have to watch my back for the walking dead... great." Ron cursed softly and made another move, putting Harry into check.

"That and whatever monstrous spells they might have up their sleeves. If what Irium told Harry is true, they could probably level all the Ministry's defenses in a day," Hermione added, her lips pursed

into a thin line and her eyes far away and calculating. "That's a lot of power."

Ron raised his brows. "Really? I thought the wards on the Ministry were weak myself. A house elf could sneeze 'em away."

Harry rolled his eyes and Hermione gave a playful swat on Ron's arm and got up from his lap. "It's not funny, Ron. We're talking about some serious magic here. The kind no one in the world has dealt with before. I haven't a clue how we can beat them."

"I have some ideas and some ideas for ideas, but I'll talk about those later," Harry added and ruefully tipped his king over. Ron would have him mated in five moves or less.

Hermione tilted her head and shared a look with her husband. Harry saw that it seemed like an entire conversation moved between the glance. Fourteen years of a bond that Harry hoped, no prayed, that he could form with Ginny. A wish that had little chance of being granted.

"Care to share with us, Harry?" Ron asked and started to set the board up again.

Harry shook his head. "Not yet. I'm expecting someone today. When they get here we'll go over it tonight. I want Ginny there as well."

Ron frowned. "Err, Harry, I know she did good in the Maze and all, but don't you think she should stay out of this? It might be beyond her level."

Harry gave a wicked little grin. "I wouldn't worry about her. I've given her some books to help out, plus she's been studying that small library that Hermione gave her to prepare for the Maze. With the Quidditch season over with for the time being, she's had a lot of free time on her hands."

"You guys talking about me again?" A wary voice called from the door. Harry looked over his shoulder and gave Ginny a smile.

“Ron’s just going on a protective tangent. Doesn’t want you to fight.”

“Oi! I didn’t say that exactly.” Ron defended himself when Ginny sent him a death glare.

“Now listen here Ronald Weasley. I’m an adult and can protect myself. I’ve just as much right to fight the council as anyone does. You try to pull this school rubbish again and I’ll hex your bits off so fast, Hermione will be wondering if she married a man or a woman!”

“Jeeze!” Ron put his hands up in front of him. “Ok, ok. I wasn’t... you know... I was just... well... you know!” Ron moved his eyes towards his wife with a pleading look.

Hermione gave him a wink and defended him. “Ron was just worried that you weren’t preparing yourself, Ginny.”

“Well I have been,” Ginny said firmly. “Enough to give you a run for your money Mr. Big Shot Auror.”

Harry leaned back to enjoy the show as Ron’s eyes lit up with challenge. “Is that so, sister dear? Care to make a wager on that?”

“No,” Hermione put a stop to the forthcoming duel. “There will be no duels here while I’m around. It’s enough to have some shadowy group spelling for our heads again. No need to fight amongst ourselves.”

Ron and Ginny both gave her a disappointed look, but acquiesced to her rule and let the subject drop. Ginny walked over and plopped down on Harry’s lap, earning a startled grunt.

Ron laughed at the pained look on Harry’s face. “So who’s coming over, Harry? When will he be here?”

“A friend. He should be here any minute... I told him that we would be here today. He’s kind of a hermit; but wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to get out of the house, if only to cause trouble.”

The group gave him an odd look. "But who is-" Hermione started to ask but was interrupted by a loud shout from downstairs.

"Non! Pervert! Get away from me!" Fleur's voice shouted out through the house.

"What the bloody hell? Get away from my wife!" they could hear Bill shout angrily. There was a bang and shortly thereafter the hallways were riddled with shouts and threats.

"What the...?" Ron asked and stood up with Hermione following him to the door.

Harry just sagged down into the chair and covered his eyes. "He's here," he said forlornly and gave a shake of his head before nudging Ginny off his lap.

The four of them rushed into the living room to find George, Bill, Charlie and Arthur with their wands drawn. Fleur was standing behind them with Molly, the both of them looking scandalized.

Across from them in the doorway was a tall gangly old man. Ron, Ginny and Hermione stopped and goggled at the sight of him. He stood over six feet tall and had matted and tangled grey hair past his shoulders, an unkempt beard that had pieces of straw and sand sprinkled through it and dingy, dirty brown robes. His skin was wrinkled and leathery brown from years in the sun. What was most amazing was that, though a bum he looked, every finger was adorned with rather ostentatious rings that held a variety of gems. Diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and rubies all sparkled like a rainbow of jewels. Around his neck, like an anchor, were a half dozen necklaces of thick gold that had to easily weigh almost ten pounds. All together it was a blinding, yet confusing sight.

"All right," Bill said angrily. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Bill, wait!" Harry exclaimed and rushed to stand in front of the old man. "Let me explain!"

"You better explain, Harry! This old codger just walked in as you please, asked where you were and then grabbed Fleur's bum!"

Harry turned and glared at the old man. "You didn't!"

He was rewarded with a gapping grin of yellowed and broken teeth and a blast of breath that stank of year old wine. "What can I say boy? Tis a mighty fine wench ye got there'. Nutin' wrong with a man havin' a touch now and 'den."

"Degoutant!" Fleur said and pulled away from Molly. "Move out zee way, Bill! I will teach this... thing, 'ow to treat a French wo'man!"

"Spicy lass there, boy!" the old man cackled and absently scratched at his beard.

Harry ignored him and waved the family off. "Everyone please calm down, it's just the way he is. He can't help it so put away your wands. Please Bill, stop trying to aim around me. He didn't mean anything by it... he's just an old pervert."

"Harry," Hermione said in exasperation, "Who is he?!"

"Well would ya look at that! Ye got a whole house O' vixens just waiting for me! I knew ya wouldn't disappoint me!"

"Harry." Ginny snarled and pulled out her own wand. "Move."

"Damnit! You!" he pointed to the old man, "Keep your dirty thoughts to yourself. And you," He pointed to Ginny, "Put your wand away. He could take the lot of you apart if you pressed him." He glanced around the room briefly until his eyes found Hermione, "And as to your question, this is my mentor from Egypt. Dilith Dimplewat. Dimplewat. These are the Weasley's; my second family."

The black eyes scanned the shocked and suspicious group. "This ain't no family, boy. Ye got a whole village of 'em. Haven't seen this much red on a set o' heads since some Indian wizards thought setting their hats on fire would spark a new fashion trend."



Harry sighed and glared barely at the old man. "Must you use 'that' accent? You know how much that annoys me."

"Get used to it. It's ma favorite." He looked Harry up and down. "You're looking well, boy. Wasn't sure what I'd find after so many years. Half expected to hear you'd got dead."

"Well I'm so thrilled you're happy I'm alive," Harry drawled.

"Is that who I think it is?" Lily said as she ran into the room. "UNCLE DIPPY!" she exclaimed when she caught sight of him and barreled through everyone and slammed into the old man, staggering him back.

"Hey, Lass!" the 'bummish' old wizard cackled out and pried her thin arms from around him with surprising strength. "I like me a dandy of a young wench, but yee've a bit more years needed, even for me."

Lily's eyes sparkled with mirth and joy as she looked up at him. She didn't even reach his chest. "But, Uncle Dippy, you said you'd marry me when I came of age."

"He did, did he?" Harry said darkly and pinned the man's very soul down with a glare. He wasn't fazed.

"Ah, but aint ye a pretty ol' thing to be warmin' this O' man's heart. Marry ye, I'd do in a dung drop of a horse, but yer' pappy over der', might be shaving a few o' my bits off if I tried."

"Your bloody damn right I would." Harry said firmly.

Lily giggled and reached up to grab the dirty beard and pulled his face down and planted a big kiss on those weathered, tobacco stained lips. She scrunched up her nose a bit at the taste and smell. "Jeeze, Uncle. You need a bath. And you smoke too much."

"Ack! The beard! The beard, girl!" It was a comical sight to see the tall man bent over with a little girl holding his facial hairs with an iron grip. Harry bit back a laugh as Dimplewat grunted and yelped when Lily

started to twist his head around by the beard. He didn't understand their relationship back in Egypt and he didn't now. They had a mysterious bond perhaps that of grandfather and granddaughter. However Harry had never had a grandfather and was not sure he could properly identify something like that.

Harry turned around to see the family was looking on with the most curious of faces. Confused, outraged, amused, appalled. For the most part they all wore the look of having walked into some twisted dreamscape where reality and imagination seemed to blend together. Harry fought against another laugh and walked up to grab their attention. "Like I said, that's my mentor from Egypt, Dilith Dimplewat. He's harmless." He gave Ginny and Fleur the once over. "Well sort of. He might try to corner the two of you, or pinch your bums when he walks past, or find an excuse to walk into your room, or shower... or bed. Lock your doors."

"Harry," Ginny scathed. "This is the 'help' you said was coming? He looks like the skin's about to come off his bones. How's an old man with roaming hands going to help us against the Council?"

The other Weasley's voiced similar concerns, meshed together into one large incoherent sentence. Harry sighed and threw up his hands and turned back to Dimplewat and Lily. "Pumpkin, could you show Dimplewat to his room? Place him in the attic. It's the only place we have left."

"Sure!" she beamed and grabbed his hand and started to pull the geezer away.

"The attic! Now listen here, boy. I'll not be some- Lily let go- I'll not be some- Damn it, girl..." His arguments faded off as Lily dragged him up the stairs, protesting all the way.

Harry leaned against the wall and took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. When he had replaced them the entire Clan was in front of him with arms folded. It wasn't the best start of their first day in the winter lodge that was for sure.

“Care to explain better now Harry? What’s an old man doing asking for you and then fondling my wife? I’m still about two steps away from turning him into something for the dog to eat.”

“We don’t have a dog.” George said.

“We will once I’m done with Harry.”

Harry winced and tried to explain. “Look, he’s not all... there at times. He’s old. Really old. I’m not sure how much, but I’d say he’s old enough to be your Aunt Muriel’s father.”

“Are you sure about that, Harry?” Hermione asked, staring up the stairs with an odd look on her face.

“Pretty sure, why?”

“Because I think... never mind. It’s impossible. Just my imagination.”

“Sweetheart,” Ron confided, “You’re imagination and/or hunches are usually true. What’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it, dear.”

“Yeah, don’t go there.” Harry gave her a meaningful look. He had a guess as to what she was thinking and Harry knew Dimplewat guarded his secrets carefully. Hermione prying could set the old man off and no one wanted that.

“I’m still waiting for an explanation, Harry.” Bill insisted, pulling the conversation back on course.

“Oh, right. Well, I guess the best way to describe it, without breaking the Ministry Secret’s regulation, is that he’s a perverted old man, whose magic is strong and I asked him here to help us with a problem. You could say he’s a consultant.” “And what problem would this be?”

“That’s enough.” Mr. Weasley said. He still had close contacts in the Ministry and knew of the situation. “Harry can’t talk about it. I’d like to

know why you invited him here though. It's a family holiday, Harry. Couldn't you have met him someplace, or waited till school resumed?" His look made Harry feel like a little boy who had disappointed his father.

"Umm, can't say I really thought about that, Mr. Weasley. I'm sorry if you're upset, but I didn't think it could wait, considering... well considering the state of things."

Mr. Weasley looked him over critically for a moment and gave a small nod. "All right then, you have my support. Just try to keep him in line, Harry. I get the feeling he's a rather loose cannon."

Harry grinned. "That's an understatement. Not sure I know anyone else who's so... eccentric."

"That's not very comforting, Harry." Molly said in a disapproving tone. He gave her one of his innocent smiles that she could never resist. Again he was rewarded with a hesitant look that melted into acceptance. He hated to manipulate her like this, but they could go on for hours on the subject of Dimplewat and his less than savory habits.

"Alright everyone. Finish getting the place ready. Lunch is in an hour and we have a Quidditch game tonight before dinner." Molly directed the family like a little general with her army.

Harry looked at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, and motioned with his head towards the stairs. They understood and followed him up quietly. They found the attic to be something else entirely. It was its own room and probably the largest in the house. Ron looked around with disappointment and a little envy. Dimplewat however was quiet pleased despite his earlier complaints.

"Boy," he said when they walked in, "Never shoulda doubted ya! Ye put this here arse o' mine in the best darn room of the place. Plenty o' space fer some dancing an maybe a couple a lady friends o' mine."

Ron snorted with laughter and even Hermione giggled; less at what he said and more to the fact that Lily was struggling with a brush to

comb out that mess of hair. At the moment she had her feet pressed against his back and was holding onto the comb with both hands and letting her bodyweight pull at the tangle. Amazingly enough the thick knot was so strong it kept her from falling to the floor, so she was sort of suspended in the air struggling to get it out. Harry sighed at the sight.

"Lily, why don't you let him get a bath before you do that?"

"Because," she answered between strained grunts as she bounced her body up and down, "Do you really think he'll take one?"

She had a point Harry thought, and so did Dimplewat. "Bath? What for? I had one last rain season a couple a months ago."

The four of them looked at each other. Harry in an 'I told you so' look; Ron in amusement; Hermione in disgust, and Ginny in nervousness. "Err, I think I'll have to insist that you take one today," Harry said firmly. He very much doubted the old wizard would be allowed to stay if he didn't.

"Bah! I'm a grown man. Take your baths and shove- OW! Damnit, girl that hurt!" Lily had finally managed to yank the knot out and had landed on the floor with a thump. She rubbed her backside and looked triumphantly at her father. Harry gave her a discreet wink and a smile.

"Look, Dimple. Molly is going to throw a fit if you set foot into the kitchen smelling like you do. She doesn't care if you're dressed in a bath rag, but she insists that no one smells at her table. Wand or not, if you test her she'll march you up here herself and throw you into the water. Don't you think you should try to keep your pride and take one yourself?" If there was anything that Harry knew about the man, it was that he very big on his pride. The insult of a woman throwing him into a tub would be too much for him.

"Well... when you say it that way," he was busy keeping his head and beard away from a fuming and agitated Lily and her dangerous comb, "I guess it couldn't hurt."

"Thank Merlin." Lily and Ginny muttered together. Harry smirked and gave the two a quick glance.

"Lily, wash Dimp's clothes for him while he takes a bath please. Molly's busy with dinner or I'd ask her."

"Why don't you do it?" Lily asked accusingly and sent him a suspicious glare. Harry gave an incredulous look and just pointed to himself in wonder. Lily sighed and nodded. "Yeah. You'd probably mess them up somehow. Come on Uncle Dimpy. Let's get you cleaned up before Dad takes a stab at cleaning you. It's not pretty."

The raven haired young girl took Dimplewat's leathered hand and led him towards the bath on the second floor. Once they were gone Ron rounded on Harry. "I like him," he said. "He's got a flare, that's for sure, but what did Lily mean about you cleaning the clothes?"

"I-umm-err-" Harry struggled with the explanation that Ginny beat him to.

"What she means," she said taking his arm and looking up at him fondly, "is that Harry can't wash clothes. No matter how simple it is, he always does something to ruin them"

"I wouldn't say that!" He protested.

"I don't get it, Harry," Hermione said looking pinched. "You've made powerful magical devices that no one in the world can copy, yet you can't 'scourgify' some clothes?"

He knew it didn't really make any sense, it was just one of his many faults. Ginny was having far too much fun at this however. "Nope!" she said with a hidden giggle to her voice. "I tried to teach him on a set of ratty school robes, but he either bleached them white, tore them in two, or cleaned even the buttons and stuff off. It was hilarious!"

"Oh! Harry!" Hermione said covering her mouth to hide the smile. Her quivering shoulders told the tale of her laughter though.

Ron was doubled over in a stitch however. Tears were streaming down his face and he was struggling to breath, only to give a laugh and waste the air again. Ginny kept telling them more stories about his disasters at house cleaning until even Hermione, her politeness forgotten, was holding the wall in support. Minutes later she was begging for mercy, while Ron was demanding more. Harry stood in the doorway with a wounded look of a puppy on his face. Ginny wiped some tears from her eyes and leaned over to give him a soft kiss.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she apologized, "but you have to admit. When you couldn't get the bubbles to stop coming out of your wand... well it was funny."

Harry quirked a brow and leaned over to whisper something in her ear. She blushed and ducked her head. She looked at Ron and Hermione through the bangs that had fallen in her face. "You're a cad, Harry Potter! A cad!" she whispered for his benefit.

Harry laugh and looped an arm over her shoulders. Lily came back in the room. "He's taking his bath," she told them. "I pity the water."

"I'm sure Dimplewat pities himself more for being dragged into some." Harry replied with a grin.

"Dad..." Lily hesitated for a moment, "What's he doing here? I mean its great that he's here and all. I really missed him, but why?"

Harry never got tired of being called dad. In fact it was his memory of when she first called his dad that he used for a Patronus. "He's here to help out with the Council." It was all he needed to say. She knew about everything now. Not what had happened in the house a few weeks back, he didn't want her to have that kind of burden on her shoulders, but she knew all about the book, the council and the danger they signified.

"Oh!" she thought for a moment. "Is he reliable enough? I mean he's kinda..." she searched for the right word, but couldn't grasp at one. Harry understood.

"I know what you mean. It's a stretch, but I have faith in him. Why don't you go and keep Victoire and Rose company. We're gonna be up here for awhile."

She nodded and left the room. Once he heard her steps plod down the stairs he turned to the rest of the group. "Let's go out on the balcony, throw up a warming charm and wait for Dimplewat. He won't be long in the bath if I know him."

They all agreed and left the attic towards the second floor. The room Harry and Ginny had taken up, much to Molly's displeasure, had a spacious balcony that faced the mountain. The blanket of diamond snow glittered in the afternoon sun, a dazzling rainbow that hurt the eye if looked at too long. They conjured chairs and a few glasses of wine thanks to Hermione and settled down as Harry cast a charm to keep the cold at bay. They sat in silence, sipping their drinks until Dimplewat showed up some twenty minutes later. He looked much different. His hair was no longer grey, but a snowy white. He still hadn't bothered to comb his hair so it was a tangled wet mop that hung heavy around his shoulders. His clothes were still ratty and worn, but had a fresh smell to them. If it wasn't for his yellowed and missing teeth, twisted into a leer at Ginny and Hermione, one would have mistaken him for a kindly and wizened old wizard.

"Ye owe me, boy. Baths are foul things. Bad for the health they are, so deep into winter."

Hermione scoffed and scooted a bit closer to Ron under the man's roaming eyes. Harry gestured for a chair that had a small table and glass next to it. "I'm glad you could come," Harry said. "I wasn't sure if you'd remember me while laying in that harem of yours I heard you started."

Dimplewat cackled and downed the wine in one swallow, then pulled out a flask of some kind of steaming liquid. "I'm not that old yet, boy. Ye've got a mighty fine adventure brewing. Slap me with a noodle and call me Mary, if I passed this up!"

Ron had his mouth open and Ginny and Hermione looked at each other. 'Slap me with a noodle?' they mouthed in question; each trying



to wrap their mind around his odd speech. Harry gritted his teeth and stopped himself from fulfilling his mentors' wish and slapping him.

"Well anyways, thanks for coming," he ground out. Dimplewat gave him another smile, obviously knowing how much his dialect got on Harry's nerves. "First thing, we need to catch everyone up with what the situation is. Let me explain and try not to interrupt. I'll answer any questions after."

The others agreed, Dimplewat just took a swig of his foul brew and hacked out a cough as it went down his throat. Harry waited until the noise subsided and began the tale. He told them all he knew and remembered about the temple, Dimplewat chimed in with his own memories that seemed a little disjointed to Harry, as though they were half forgotten. He told the group what he knew about the book and how far his readings and translation went. That he refused to look into the technique any further once he found out it used another persons magical core.

"But Harry," Hermione chimed in at one pointed, "I thought you said-"

Harry raised his hand. "It's what I thought. These translations are from a four thousand year dead language. They were rough and gave only vague descriptions. If I had known the truth..." Harry shook his head in regret then pushed the mistake behind him. "After we fled the temple I had to figure out who attacked us. Clues led me to America. I had to go there and find out what I could. During my search I finally found out their name. The Council of Phyre. Only they were using a dozen large corporations as fronts for their operations. I was doing some scouting in some recluse Wizarding communities up in Canada when I ran into a vampire named D'Arthy. He had a rather nice black market network set up to smuggle illegal goods around the world. He was using loop-holes in the International Treaty to get around several inspection points. I masqueraded as a dealer in exotic goods to lure him into a trap."

Harry poured himself another drink before continuing. "After a rather nasty fight I was able to snag him and three of his fellow wizards. D'Arthy, it turns out, was a jackpot of information. He somehow found out that the so called Leader of the Council, a man named Irium, had

a son that wasn't on the same track as his father. He didn't want any part of the Council or their operations. D'Arthy was able to groom and befriend the young man for information that he hoped would allow him to blackmail the Council for a lot of gold. I found out six of the Council's names before D'Arthy was able to escape. I tracked them down and hired several wizards to keep track on their operations. At this point I was offered a job by the American Ministry to oversee the reformation of their educational system. I'll admit to you all now that this was a half lie. The truth is I offered some of the knowledge I had at the time to let them allow me to use the job as an excuse to use the Ministry resources to try and bring the Council down. It became an economic battle then. I'd make a move and stall or ruin an operation and they'd come up with something else. I'd expose one of the members and they would turn up dead and someone else would take their place. All the while I was doing my best to hide my identity to keep Lily and the book safe.

"It was long and hard, and eventually they vanished off the American map. For some reason they almost stopped all their dealings in the states. I was frantic to find them again. I had only one lead. An American shipping company that specialized in commercial merchandise suddenly altered their business plan and clientele. I delved into their past and found out that they were linked to a couple of the Council's organizations. I found them. The owner, I'm sure you all remember Eric O'Soule, had packed up and moved to England. There was no reason that I could determine. They were taking huge losses across the board by all their canceled operations. So if he was in England, it was a safe bet that most of the council would be there to. It was my greatest opportunity. I could go home at last. I didn't hesitate and pulled Lily out of school early and we came here. I was finally home." He looked at Ginny and picked up her hand, kissing the tips of her fingers. She blushed and squeezed his hand in return.

"Being back in England gave me a huge amount of power to find them and stop them. I have a lot of influence and friends, powerful friends, who could help me stop them. The first thing I did was speak to Kingsley about my return. The man had managed to somehow keep track of me over the years. No matter how deep underground I went he would always send me a letter or give some sign that he knew where I was. Frustratingly clever he is. He pulled me away

several times to help him here with a couple of things. Namely, getting the Ministry and the Goblins to come to term with wand rights.”

“You did that?!” Hermione interrupted with a gasp. “I thought something was odd about that. One night there was a rebellion brewing and the next time everyone was acting all buddy-buddy and the laws were passed in minutes. No one could figure out what happened.”

Harry blushed himself and tried to shrug it off. “Well something had to be done. The Ministry and Goblins were being stubborn over the whole thing. It took a lot of threats and persuasion to convince them. You would have been proud of me, Hermione. I was very eloquent.”

“I would have been. Why didn’t you let us know you were around? You could have said or done something. Anything.”

“And what would I have done Hermione? Showed up at your door said hello then leave a day or two later? I stopped in and made sure everyone was ok, but to just appear out of no where would have just hurt too many people if I had to leave again. Plus I was scared. I had been gone a long time. I thought about it, but hadn’t a clue about what to say. It would have been too awkward.”

“I don’t know about you mate,” Ron spoke up, “But a simple; ‘Hi, I’m alive but I can’t stay long and wanted to see everyone’ would’ve done wonders.”

“Boy, I traveled thousands of miles for adventure. Not some tear-jerking reunion. Get to the point.”

“Err, right,” Harry gave his friends a shy grin. “So I told Kingsley everything that had happened and what was going on. He assigned a special task force to find the council and shut them down. To keep the force a secret, whenever they would find something they would send in the Aurors, usually headed by Ron, to take control of the situation.”

“So that’s what all those worthless raids were about,” Ron interrupted with a scowl. “I was just some hired muscle.”

“In a sense,” Harry agreed. “Two things really threw the plan for a loop though. One, was that Ginny was now dating my best lead, Eric; and two, Kingsley was having that bloody Maze. The good thing was that with him dating Ginny he was more open in his movements. It’s hard to hide when you’re with an international Quidditch super-star.”

“Harry...” Ginny flushed and scolded him lightly. She wasn’t even close to that level.

“Sorry love,” he patted her hand, “but it’s true. So I started to set up shop. I knew that the Ministry would need some serious help so I started to make various rings, amulets, robes and other things to give them the best protection I could. I started to keep track of Ginny and Eric’s operations. Then he started talking to an old acquaintance of ours. Draco.”

“Malfoy!” Ron jumped a bit and his eyes almost popped out of his head. “That sea-slug is working for the council now?”

“Actually, according to my sources, he’s to be inaugurated as a member at the start of the New Year. He’s going to be taking the place of other members.”

“Oh?” Ron interjected again. “Canned some people did they?”

“You could say that...” Harry hesitated and looked at Ginny softly. “I just found out last night, luv. About Eric... he’s dead. They killed him.”

Everyone, even Dimplewat held their breath and looked at Ginny. “Oh...” she said in soft surprise. Her eyes widened a bit. “Oh... I...” she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know why but she felt something get crushed or crumpled inside of her. Despite the lies and the crimes, even the attempt on her life, she still cared for him. The time with him was really nice. Wonderful. He helped her become a woman and not just a girl on a broom.

"You ok?" Harry asked in knowing concern. She gave a small nod, and reached up to wipe an annoying tear that drifted down her cheek.

"I'm fine," she whispered. "It's just a shock."

"Why don't you go have a drink and take a nap? I can catch you up on everything tonight."

She smiled over to him gratefully and gave a reluctant shake of her head. "It's ok. I'd rather be here..." she didn't want to say more. For some reason her emotions of Eric's death were quickly getting to her. She didn't want to break down in front of everyone, especially Harry. He wouldn't understand.

Harry watched her sadly for a moment. He hated that she still obviously felt something for that murdering bastard, but he couldn't very well just tell someone to stop caring. Might as well tell water not to be wet. It would just push her away. He shook his head and continued with the story. "So I was able to keep tabs on Eric's movements. When I discovered that Ginny had seen Eric talking to Draco I knew that it would only be a matter of time before they tried to kill her. So I had Hermione give her that amulet for the Maze, to protect her. Unfortunately I didn't foresee that they would ban all my artifacts from the competition. So I had to show myself early and enter the Maze myself." He looked over at Ron. "You know, adding a Shiva to the thing was damn dangerous. Bloody impossible in fact."

"Well anyways, I was now in the open. They knew who I was and started to work against me more openly. Then a couple of weeks ago Irium was able to use his Grandson, Simon, to trick Lily into letting them into the house without the wards going crazy. I still don't know how they were able to take apart my defenses so fast. Or how they knew that the book in the first room was a fake."

"I've been thinking about that," Hermione said and everyone turned to look at her. Dimplewat burped loudly. "Well I think that they might have some sort of mark that lets them know about the book. Sort of like the Dark Mark. I mean it seems impossible that after thousands of years they've never had a traitor or something to expose them to

the world. An enchanted mark or the like seems the best explanation.”

“I reckon she has a point,” Dimplewat spoke up. “One of those thieving mules back at the Pyramid had one on his upper shoulder. It was a small thing. Just showed a scroll burning. Sounds about right though.”

Harry looked up at the cloud capped mountain and slowly gave a nod. “That’s probably it. The book itself was probably bound to them and gave them some help. I should of thought of that.” Harry softly cursed in frustration. He winced as Dimplewat leaned over and rapped him smartly on the head.

“I told you back then that self pity is for children, boy. I’ve lived more years than I can count and if I harped on all my mistakes I woulda’ been buried in a ditch long ago.”

Harry gave a wry smile. It was good to see the old man again. “Still. At least we have something to go on now. Maybe we can turn that mark against them in some way. So here’s how we stand. I have two more names in the Council besides Irium. They have an enormous amount of money, an entire Ministry worth of influence, and an army of Inferni. With the book they can cast spells and perform magic we could only dream of. We’re really the underdog at this point. Ideas?”

“Can we figure out where their lair is and attack them head on?” Ron asked. Harry shook his head.

“I threw everything I had at their first lair and it barely made a dent. With the book at their command it would take hundreds of wizards to bring them down before they could flee. Plus they moved and I don’t know where.”

“What about Draco, Harry?” Ginny asked. “Could we blackmail him into helping us get in?”

“No. I want to keep him in reserve. He’s my trump card and last resort. I can put some pressure on him when there is no other alternative.”

"That's a dangerous game, boy," Dimplewat scoffed. "Not using all your resources to hit them hard before they can get momentum. Yer askin' fer a headache."

"I know but right now they see us as an irritant. They're confident that we can't stop them. We may only get once chance at this. And if it fails then I'll bring Draco into the equation. For the time being simply watching him can let us know when things start to move. Let's get focused again. How can we stop them?"

"Well," Ron said and scratched at his beard. "If you can get to them, then you have to get them to come out."

Harry leaned forward. "Go on."

"Well, it seems to me if they value gold so much, hit them where it hurts. Their purse. Find out what banks they do business in and target those. Squeeze every front they use until they come out. Then hit them."

"That sounds promising. It will be hard though. Gringotts and the other banks have always run independently of the Ministries. I don't have any influence beyond England."

"We don't want to ruin them completely. Just enough to draw them out of hiding. We target four or five. Split them up and hit each independently. If what you say is true about the nature of The Book, then each of them we take down weakens the whole. If we can snag half of them quickly it could level the playing field against the Ministry."

"Ron has a point, Harry," Hermione said flashing a proud smile at her husband. "At the very least if we can get one they might be able to tell us the secret behind the technique. If we have that then they won't be able to face the Ministry head on."

"Hmm, you kids got me thinkin'," Dimplewat jumped in. He was twirling his wet beard idly in his finger. "What are they aiming at?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

“Well. They are a strong group. Been around forever. Have more money than Gringotts. They have plenty of power, but what are they after? Why did they pack their horses and haul those lazy rumps of theirs from America all of a sudden? Why this army of fly traps? Seems a little overdone if you ask me. They want something and they are willing to take down a country to get it. Seems to me like we need to find out what it is.”

They were all silent as they thought about that. In all the hustle and bustle of preparing for the coming war they had forgotten to look into the root of the matter. Why war? Hundreds of ideas ran through their minds. Each more dreadful than the last. They already had a powerful weapon. Going to war would only expose them more and risk their influence, money and power around the world. They were after something that only the book could give them.

“Ron...” Ginny said with a sudden light in her eyes. “Do you remember when Aunt Muriel and Uncle Bilus used to get together? What would they do for hours?”

Ron looked at her like she was daft. “What’s that got to do with anything? They would sit around and drink and talk about the ‘good old days’, as they liked to call ‘em.”

“What are you getting at Ginny?” Harry asked with some confusion.

“Well think about it. The Council seems to be rooted deep in tradition and the past. They have wealth, power, and influence. You told me after... well after you fought them at that mountain, that Irium said they could now perform amazing spells. So there’s only one thing a group like that could want.” She looked around at all of them. Everyone was looking dazed, trying to figure out her meaning. Only Dimplewat seemed to understand as he laughed and slapped his knee hard. Ginny rolled her eyes and blew out a breath. “They want to bring back the past! The glory days of Magic when the world looked at Wizards in awe. Break the secrecy! Let the whole world know about us!”



“Sweet Merlin!” Ron said in horror. “Didn’t they learn from the witch hunts?! If they did that then the muggles would go crazy! They’d hunt us all over again.”

“It’d be worse than that,” Hermione said grimly, a dark look in her eyes. “Muggles are much more powerful since then. First there would be astonishment and disbelief. Then would come the fear. The governments would cave in from the pressure of the people and try to round us up. We would fight back of course, but that would take things towards a lethal turn. It would be a global war. Muggles versus Wizards. Technology versus Magic.” She shook her head and hugged herself as a shiver ran down her back. “They have weapons that wizards can’t hope to defeat.”

“Like what?” Ron asked doubtfully. Hermione met Harry’s eyes. They both knew what she meant.

“Nuclear weapons.” They said together.

“Nunnier weapons?” Ron scratched his head. “Is that some sort of religious conversion thing?”

“No, Ron.” Hermione said patiently. She was used to his ignorance of the Muggle world. “Nuclear weapons. They’re bombs. Ones that can destroy a city in an instant. They won’t even need to be there. They would press a button. A missile would fly away and minutes later Hogwarts, Hogsmead and the entire forbidden forest will be destroyed. Totally obliterated. Only bones and ash would be left. Nothing would survive. The castle itself would be nothing but foundation blocks.”

Ginny and Ron gulped and looked at each other. “Is... Is that even possible?”

“It’s possible all right.” Harry ran a hand through his ruffled mess of hair. “Good job, Ginny. This changes things... it means we have to stop them as soon as possible. Dimplewat. We need your help... Can you do anything?”

The old man looked over his apprentice thoughtfully. His bored and mirthful eyes sharpened to a keen blade. "I just might be able to. We'll need some more help. The best. Call in a bunch of favors. Do some traveling, and the sort."

Harry leaned back and looked at the old man warily. "No," he said.

Dimplewat grinned and tugged at his beard with a sly laugh. "You'll need to go to Russia-"

"No!"

"And cozy up to that Silvia girl."

"No!"

"And see if you can't stir up her passion again-"

"Damnit, Dimplewat!"

"And have her chase you around the world and tearing down buildings again to impress you."

"Out of the question," Harry said forcefully. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him and he refused to look in her direction.

"What's wrong, boy? She's a fine looking wench!"

"Mr. Dimplewat, sir?" Ginny asked sweetly. Harry winced and Ron started to inch his chair closer to Hermione, who was looking thoroughly amused. "Who is this Silvia?"

Dimplewat looked Ginny over a bit and scooted over to her and threw an arm around her shoulder. "Silvia is a Russian Princess. One of the most beautiful women in the world. And I've seen some lookers. Her hair is as black as a night sky and is so long that she uses a hover charm to keep it off the floor. Perfect skin, perfect body. A model of how a woman should look. She also happens to be one of the most powerful witches in the world. Vicious little thing. Totally and completely infatuated with our Harry here. Want to hear more?"

“Oh my, yes. Tell me everything.” her eyes flittered to Harry and glittered dangerously.

“Erm... Ginny...”

“Well after the boy suckered me into teaching him a few things, about a month into his time in Egypt we are sitting at a table having dinner when all of a sudden the door swings open. I look over and see this beautiful woman standing in my doorway. She looked snobby for a moment as she looked around, but when her eyes fell on Harry here she practically swooned. She called out his name and rushed across the room and gave lover boy here one of the most serious kisses I’ve ever seen a woman lay on a man.”

“Really?” Ginny asked through gritted teeth between a false smile.

“It wasn’t like that, Ginny! I swear it!”

“So, being the discrete gentleman I am, I introduced myself.”

“You grabbed her ass and she brought the house down!” Harry protested.

“Well your hands were rather firmly attached there, lad. I figured it was only proper to share! One of the finest I’ve ever felt!”

“Please go on, Mr. Dimplewat. I’m most eager to hear about Harry’s.... exploits.” Harry groaned and threw his head in his hands.

“Well he was right. She took offense to my introduction. Thought it was a compliment myself. Now I’m a good shot with a wand. Know my stuff, I’ll admit, but that girl is a temptress of magic. She had me flying out the door and the next thing I know my house is coming down. Well, I’m right mad at this point and ready to do some damage to the girl, but Harry got hurt. Seemed he bruised his arm a little in the fall. She goes into hysterics and starts to tend to him. Vanishes his shirt and everything and starts to run her hands all over his body to see if he’s alright. Harry here gets all shy and starts to try to get away. Well things finally calm down and with a few waves of some wands

my house is in proper order again. So I set myself down to get the story out of this devil of a girl. Turns out our lass here met up with some people while in Russia. A group of witches and wizards. Silvia there was the great grand daughter of their leader, Rasputin.”

“Rasputin?!” Hermione said in shock.

“The same.” Dimplewat said with a nod. “Knew the man. Mean old thing. I’d rather drink turpentine and piss on a brass fire than get that one mad. Our boy here managed to do everything wrong. This group takes him in, teaches him about the Dark Arts, how to see them, use them, recognize them. That sort of stuff. Planned to groom him into some sort of secret agent or something.”

“Ambassador...” Harry muttered.

“Right, that’s it. Well Silvia here meets our young Harry and being the first man her own age she had ever met, naturally falls for him. Spoiled little Princess declares that he is now hers forever more. Harry turns her down; still don’t understand why, and rebuffs all advances from her. So, not being one to take no for an answer she slips a sleeping potion into his drink and has her way with him.”

“Harry!” Ginny looked over at him furiously, her hair flittered and waved in a bit of wild magic. “You said I was your first!”

“You-You were! The first I remembered!” Harry defended himself desperately.

“AHAHAHA!” Dimplewat laughed and started to move his arm down to the front of Ginny’s chest. She pushed his hand back up and looked back at the man.

“Watch the hands. Continue the story.”

Dimplewat have a shrug and a wink. “So the next day she goes to her father and declares that Harry ‘deflowered’ her and demands marriage. Rasputin isn’t a man for humor. They do a check and sure enough proved that our innocent boy here took the lass’s virginity. Rasputin has Harry dragged into a cell and is ready to have him killed.

Our sweet Silvia, distraught over the possible loss of her love, tells everyone that she will throw herself from the top of the tower if she can't live with Harry. Too many romance novels, that girl. So Rasputin declares that they will be married immediately. They clean Harry up and drag him in front of an altar. Now naturally everyone forgot that Harry was dragging little Lily around. So she was left all alone. Little girl had a bit of a problem with someone trying to kill off her Daddy and all. She takes matters into her own hands.

"What did she do?" Ron asked in fascination.

Dimplewat grinned and stared at Harry. "Well boy?"

Harry sighed. "They were doing some dragon breeding off in the forest. She took some female pheromones and poured it around the wedding hall. In minutes we had a couple of Hungarian Horntails trying to get in."

Dimplewat laughed. "Hah! From what I heard one of those dragons was trying to get friendly with Rasputin himself. The entire hall broke into mayhem and Harry grabbed Lily and ran out. Little girl was smart enough to bring his broom so they flew right away."

Ron started to roar with laughter and even Hermione was giggling. Ginny had a mutinous look on her face and was doing her best to kill Harry with her glare. He winced and tried to apologize with his eyes, but she was having none of it. Harry knew he would either have to do some major damage control or would be sleeping with Dimplewat for awhile.

"That's great!" Ron was still laughing. "What happened next?"

"Well, Silvia it turns out wasn't too happy to be jilted on her wedding day. So she packed up and leaves to go looking for Harry. She finally finds him almost a year later with me. So we decides to hole up in my house with him, Silva trying her best to woo him into returning with her and living happily ever after. When that doesn't work she tried to convince him that she was better off with him and decides to disown her heritage and run with Harry around the world. She sends a flowery letter to Rasputin who was spending a dandy amount of

galleons to find her. She says that she isn't coming home and that her place is with Harry. So here we are, stuck in a desert. Harry is trying to get her to go away and she's trying to get him into her bed. Tried the potion thing again; didn't work. Tried to make him jealous by bringing a guy home. The guy ran away. Poor lass was miserable and heart broken. Sweet Harry here wouldn't even hold her hand."

"I'm sure he couldn't keep his hands to himself when they were alone." Ginny said savagely. Harry gave a sigh.

"Well about a month later Rasputin shows up with a small posse, ready to take Silvia back and kill Harry and myself. Naturally I'm not too keen to lose my beard, so I try to make peace with them."

Harry scoffed. "More like you claimed to have nothing to do with it and ran away."

"Strategic retreat." Dimplewat said sagely. "So here's Rasputin, ready to kill, and him and Harry start to duel. Nice little fight. Harry holds him off for about a minute before the old man takes him down. They literally tie him and are about to hang him. Now I hate to ruin a good lynching, but the boy was paying me good money, so I felt obliged to step in."

"After I was already dangling."

Dimplewat ignored that. "The old man was pretty good with a wand, but I was slightly better. More years you know. I catch him with a sleeping charm and his apprentices, or whatever they were, step in and it's a battle royal. Myself, Harry and Silvia against half of Rasputin's organization. Silvia actually holds her own and takes down most of them with a few well placed spells and transfigurations. We win the little fight; was pretty fun; and Silvia, her face flushed from passion throws herself into Harry's arms and gives him another kiss. The kiss for a hero. Too bad Rasputin wakes up right to see her throw herself at Harry. Doesn't take too kindly to seeing his only remaining family throwing herself at an Englishman. Harry tries to talk things down. Silvia starts to plead for his life and they finally come to an agreement. Silvia will go back with him and Harry will never set foot in Russia again or even speak to his Grand daughter."

Dimplewat gave Ginny a squeeze, which she pulled away from when his hand tried to roam once more. "And that's that. Heartbroken girl is stolen away by her father to leave the bloodied hero alone on the battlefield."

Hermione was giggling and Ron laughingly gave his best friend a punch in the arm. "Mate, you never told us about that. I bet you have a lot of stories."

Dimplewat cackled some more. "Oh that was nothing. You should have been there when I took him to Brazil and he accidentally completed the marriage ceremony for the Queen of this tribe. The woman was glowing as she dragged him into her hut and-"

"Dimplewat," Harry interrupted with a nasty smile, "Did you ever manage to get away from that Inn keepers daughter?"

The old man quickly shut up and eyes Harry carefully. "That's enough for story time I think."

"Very," Harry agreed.

"You still need to go and see if she can help. The girl is an expert on Transfiguration and finance. She'll know how to hit them in the right spots."

"If I show up Rasputin is liable to have my head faster than I can say Merlin."

"I don't think so. Not if you explain the emergency and agree to a few... precautions. Offer an unbreakable vow to keep your intentions away from Silvia. He might go for it."

"Ummm... there's other concerns." Harry darted a glance to Ginny who was still silently fuming.

"Oh don't mind me. Bring her over. Line up and parade your old lovers in front of me. I promise I won't do anything to them."

"Ginny, it really wasn't like all that."

"I'll bet," she said testily, Harry thought she was being rather unreasonable about the whole thing.

"Who's that girl that stomped you on a broom? She could be of help too."

"Laura?" Harry said with some surprise and thought that over. "...Yeah. She really could be of some help."

"Laura?" Ginny's voice rose a bit. "Another lover?"

Harry glowered a bit. "No, if she came I'd have to lock you away Gin. She'd be all over you."

Ginny blinked. "Oh..."

Harry settled back into his chair. He would deal with the jealousy tonight. "So we try to bring Silvia and Laura into things. Then target the Council's finances, bring them into the open and knock them off one by one. Then we squeeze them for the technique and fight fire with fire. So far that seems to be a rough outline. Any other suggestions?" Everyone shook their head. "Then let's head to dinner. It should be almost ready."

Everyone filed out and Harry stopped Ginny with a touch. When they were alone she rounded on him, tears burning her eyes. "How could you lie to me like that, Harry? I don't care if you had other women in your life; but what you told me, I thought you shared with me was something special!"

"Ginny. She was a snobby brat who always got what she wanted. I was drugged and in a near coma. I don't remember a thing. It was a long time ago and as far as I am concerned you were my first. I didn't like what she did one bit and I've done my best to forget about it." He reached out and dragged a finger down her cheek. "Forgive me? Please?"



Ginny sighed and rested against him, her head lay near his heart and listened to the soothing beat. "I'm sorry. You're right. I don't know why I got so jealous. I guess it's the old feelings still inside me. You're Harry Potter; Savior and Wizard extraordinaire. When I was young I used to think it was impossible that you'd ever like me back. During my fifth year I thought it was a dream come true, but I was always scared that one day you'd wake up and realize that I was just plain old Ginny Weasley and you'd run off with Cho Chang or another Fleur. And now... I still feel like that sometimes. You're so much greater than you were. Taller, more handsome; the model hero. I gave up a lot when I took you back, Harry. I'm still scared that one day you'll wake up and find someone better. A Russian Princess maybe."

Harry buried his face in her hair and breathed her in. He loved her smell: cinnamon and fresh mowed grass. His arms pulled her in closer. "You're my only princess. My flame haired warrior princess. I don't want anyone else, only you. And you know what?"

She pulled away and looked up at him. "What?"

"I don't want you in front of me or behind me. I want you by my side." He tilted her face up and her breath caught. "Together."

"Mmmm...I like that, Harry." She collapsed into his arms and melted into his kiss. Their lips were still locked together like a magnet when he swept her up into his arms.

"Let's skip dinner. I have something else in mind."

She sighed happily and gave him her best smile. "I'm yours. Take me away."

She laughed as he carried her into the room and laid her on the bed. They kicked their shoes off and they thudded against the far door. Ginny sighed and laid back as his hands flicked open the buttons on her cream colored blouse and exposed her bra-encased breasts. A deep and guttural purr rose from her throat and she worked open the clasp of his jeans and pushed them down his hips. As his lips worked a teasing train down her neck she drew in a breath as her bra was flung away and his lips found the mounds of her chest.

“Oh Merlin, Harry. Now. I want you now.” They began to tear at each other’s clothes and their limbs wrapped around each other. Her breathing hitched as they began the gentle movements of their love-making. Her hand bruised into his shoulders and her nails bit into his skin as their crescendo increased.

The door opened. “Dad, I- OH MY GOD!”

Ginny screamed and rolled behind Harry. “LILY! BLOODY HELL!” he raged and quickly threw the sheets over them.

Lily quickly ran from the room and slammed the door behind her. “I’m so sorry!” the girl wailed from the other side. They heard the pounding of her running down the hall and the stairs.

“I-can’t-believe-that happened.” Ginny moaned from under the covers. Harry, deciding it would make his embarrassment a tad less, joined and pulled them over his head as well.

They looked at each other in the darkness under the covers. “I forgot to lock the door,” He apologized.

“Gee, Harry. You think?” she drawled sarcastically. They stared at each other for a moment and they began to laugh and giggle like school children. “Oh, Merlin,” she breathed after a moment. “That reminded me of when I walked in on Mum and Dad one time. I was so embarrassed.”

“I’m kind of embarrassed myself to tell the truth.” Harry flushed, and she with him.

“Do you think she’ll tell anyone?” Ginny asked with horror.

Harry looked doubtful. “No... she wouldn’t...”

“GINERVA MOLLY WEASLEY!” Molly’s voice thundered from downstairs. They cringed.

That answered that question.

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The holidays floated past with a flurry of activity and laughter. For a brief moment all the stress and plans were put on hold as they had fun and lived. They went skiing and sledding, dined at fine restaurants and sampled the finest of Swedish food. When the snow fell heavy around the log cabin they made forts for the children to play in and grand igloos to roam around in. The greatest treasure for Harry was Teddy; his godson. A few days after they had arrived Andromeda brought her grandson over to meet Harry. It was over for him at that point and for Lily too. She immediately declared that he was now her little brother and they went everywhere together. Harry had to almost beg to be allowed in the fun.

Not only was Harry enchanted with his godson and the affect he had on Lily. The young boy, smart as a whistle and already fast becoming a master of his metamorphmagus abilities, helped to heal the bond between father and daughter. With a new addition to their little family and Ginny fast becoming a mother figure in Lily's life, despite her constant refusal, the four of them could often be found together no matter the time or day. Sometimes staying up late at night in their rooms and falling asleep in the grandiose bed. Lily was bound and determined to be the best sister in the world and was very protective of the boy, who was now seven, almost eight.

The presents that year were especially precious for everyone. Harry gave Ron and Hermione a large photo-album of his travels. Each picture having a brief description and where it was taken and what the situation was. It gave them a kind of running account of his life that they could look through and see the gradual changes that had come over their friend. He also gave them tickets for a cruise. He wanted them to have a second honeymoon. Three weeks around the Caribbean. Hermione was screaming and jumping up and down. She clearly loved them.

In return they also gave Harry a photo album. It held all their most precious moments together. Shopping for a wedding cake, a dress, the reception and party afterwards. Several scenes from their honeymoon and the birth of Rose. Even though Harry was secretly there for most of those events, he was moved and spent the better part of an hour looking through the thick book.

For Ginny he gave her his most precious possession. His firebolt. Though there were better brooms out there now, it was still one of the best. It could handle anything in the league and Harry had made several adjustments over the years. She didn't know what to say. When she asked him why he would give this to her he gave only one reply. "I want my past to be in the hands of my future." He didn't come out and say it, but it was a hint that she had only give the signal and he would ask for her hand in marriage.

What Ginny got Harry stunned him. It was a promise ring. Two of them. She told him that while she wasn't ready for even an engagement yet, it was a promise that for the time, she was completely his and when she was ready the rings would let him know to ask and she would say yes. Their love-making was especially tender that Christmas night.

Harry had to rush to find what he wanted to give Teddy, but a quick trip back to his Gringotts vaulted netted it. It was his father's diary. Remus's school exploits with the marauders. Remus had left it to him in his will and had been sitting there until the moment that Harry could give it to his son. While Teddy was hesitant about Harry at first, that vanished with the gift. They really became godfather and godson with Teddy hanging onto every word that Harry said. Following him around eagerly and trying to impress. He didn't need to try, Harry was impressed by everything the boy did. He always would be.

Lily got the best present of all. When she opened it up and he told her what it was she just sat there. For hours she was in the corner looking at the present and nothing else. Every now and then they could catch a few tears going down her alabaster cheeks. Harry, with a great amount of expense and time had found out who her original parents where. It was a picture of them on their wedding day. He couldn't find out if they were alive and if not, how they had died. He

still had some people working on it, but it was the best he could come up with. Hours later she had cornered him privately and hugged him tightly. They held each other for several minutes, her crying into his shirt and him kissing her over and over again, telling her how sorry he was that she hadn't known them and that he loved her so much. It was one of the tenderest moments they had ever shared. And in that embrace, all was forgiven. All was forgotten and a promise made never to hurt each other again.

And thus the holidays faded away as the day school resumed rushed to meet them. They were all so comfortable there. Even with Dimplewat snatching a feel or a pinch when he could. The women finally decided to just let him be and didn't tell the men. They found the attention flattering, if a bit perverse, and gave the old man small indulgences. Very small. Whenever he gave them a pat or a pinch on the butt they would scold him and chase him away, but he seemed to love the game more than the touching. Even though Bill tried his best to hex the man all his spells and plans seemed to miss or go awry. Harry tried to tell him that it was useless, that the old man was sharper than he acted to be, but he wouldn't hear of it. He finally stopped when one of his spells seemed to bend and hit Fleur instead of Dimplewat. Her embarrassment at having her clothes vanished; Harry suspected that Dimplewat had somehow set up an enchantment on her just for such an occasion, had earned him a week on the couch.

Still, the holidays ended and the future loomed before them. Soon Harry would need to make several trips to look into Silvia and Laura and with their help mold a plan that they hoped would lead them to victory. It was a dim and gloomy future, with a bleak and terrible ending if they failed. They couldn't, even if it cost them their lives.

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End Part 1

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A/N - And there we have it. Part one and most of the plot developments are over. Things are going to speed up now and we will explore more of the Harry/Ginny relationship as it develops in the war. This is not the end of the story. I just thought it would be nifty to have 2 parts. You know, like in professional novels!

- I am really looking forward to writing in Silvia. What I already have written in for the next chapter is some of the most fun I've ever had writing this story. I love to see cat fights! And Harry in the middle! Here is a brief except from the next chapter.

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"Harry! You came for me!" Ginny and Harry turned to see a slender pale woman rush across the hall. Her dark hair a sea of shadows at it fanned through the air. Before they knew it Silvia had her arms wrapped around him and was pulling his down for a kiss.

Ginny saw red. Before she knew it she had her wand ready and a spell on her lips. "You finish that kiss, girl and I'll shave your head bald!" she said tightly, more than ready to risk life and limb to declare that Harry was her's and her's alone.

Silvia paused in her movement and slowly turned her head. Her eyes narrowed to slits as they two women met for the first time. Harry tried to pry her arms away, but she was like a cat with her claws sunk for the ride. Sensually she brought her body against Harry's and her cheek against his chest. All the while looking straight at Ginny.

"My love," her voice silken with hidden jelouscy and menace, "One of the tarts from the brothral followed you. Pay her and get rid of her."

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- just a small taste. Gods I'm having a blast.

- as always READ AND REVIEW!

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## The Prime Laws of Magic

Law of Result: Energy brought forth from the ethereal must be balanced by energy from the physical. – Simply put, if you cast a spell you must have the required magic within you to return to the ethereal, that which you take. If the balance is not met the casters life will be taken and the energy will dissipate into the physical plane when the link is broken.

Law of Affect: The ethereal can not affect the ethereal - Magic, being from the Ethereal Plane of Possibilities, can only affection the Physical Plane of Reality, as possibilities exist separate from each other until brought into reality by magic. You can't transfigure or alter what technically, doesn't exist.

-Addendum: A spell in its ethereal form can be altered if the ethereal affects it on the ethereal plane.

--\* Harry Potter achieved this with his questionable use of Transfiguration. In reality his work causes the ethereal form to pass the barrier from the Physical back to the Ether to be 'altered' and then back again in it's new form of possibility.

Law of Life: A soul is constant. It can not be created or destroyed – The soul is the link between the Physical and the Ethereal. It can only be altered or sent to one plane or the other as long as the Law of Result and Affect is maintained.

## The Secondary Laws of Magic

Law of Control: No magic can intrude on another's link to the ethereal. – Without allowance another magical being can not steal, destroy, or control another magical being's 'core'.

Law of Conjunction: A conjured item can not stay in stability if a magical link is not available. Conjured items will immediately vanish if they can not draw from the link to the Ethereal Plane of Possibility. Magical beings work best, but in places of high magic they will last longer. If around muggles they will vanish as soon as the casting wizard leaves the area.



Second Law of Conjunction: – Life can not be conjured. – In the instance that animate objects or life is conjured, it is actually just a form of magic that imitates the movements of life. For example, you can conjure what looks like food and eat it, but it will provide no nutrients and once eaten will eventually vanish.

Five Laws of Elemental Transfiguration: \*Omitted due to recent discoveries by Harry Potter\*

True Law of Transfiguration: There is no law – All matter and energy can be transformed, transferred, increased or decreased as long as the Prime Laws of magic are maintained. \*It is theorized that while a soul can not be created, energy can be transfigured into a soul. Thus allowing new 'life'.\*-URGENT! DO NOT ATTEMPT! DO NOT ATTEMPT! A life given is a life lost, we realized this too late.

## Chapter 20

### A Gathering of Allies

The cold wind of the Siberian blizzard blew at their backs. No matter how many layers of clothes they wore, it seemed to cut through and bite at their skin like tiny shards of glass. The howling swirls kicked up white dervishes and even blocked out the crunch of their heavy furred boots through the snow. The white-out was so thick that they could have been ten feet from their location and not have known it. Nothing but a wall of white whichever way they turned. It was a good thing they had tied a heavy rope between them, or they would have been separated and lost a half dozen times already. The smaller of the two gave a mighty tug on the rope. The tallest stopped in his plowing and turned back and pulled down a thick mask that protected his face from the storm.

“ARE WE LOST?!” Ginny screamed as loud as she could in Harry’s face.

He shook his head and leaned closer to her ear. Even this close he had to use his strongest voice for her to hear. “NO! WE’VE GOT ANOTHER HOUR OR SO TO GO!”

“IT FEELS LIKE WE’RE GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES!”

“WE ARE! THE BLIZZARD IS ONLY ABOUT A MILE IN DIAMETER! YOU HAVE TO KEEP CIRCLING CLOSER AND CLOSER OR YOU’LL BE LOST FOREVER!”

“THEN WHAT ARE YOU STILL TALKING FOR?! GET MOVING! I’M BLOODY COLD!”

Harry grinned; his eyes alight with excitement behind the heavy goggles, and pulled his mask back up. He was cold too. One of quirks of Rasputin’s defenses was that you couldn’t use magical means to reach his tower or to protect yourself. You had to trudge and plow through the snow the old fashioned way; with lots of layers and stamina. No warming charms or blowing away the snow with spells.

When Ginny had decided to make this trip with him, he was furious at first. He didn't want her trapped there and in danger. It took several nights of fights and arguing for him to relent. In the end it was her reminding him of his promise to let her fight at his side that swayed him. As he told her before, he couldn't ever really say no. He owed her too much to stuff her in a closet. So here they were; tied together and making their way through a magical blizzard that could have buried a small city. He had a twelve foot pole that he used to poke ahead of their trail. It was a precaution to avoid patches of pure powder that, if they stepped in, would soon leave them buried past their heads to freeze. They had on muggle snow shoes; Large wicker planks that allowed them to move more easily across the surface.

They continued on. It was their only option. To turn back now would kill them. To go forward could kill them as well. Still, no risk, no reward so they took one heavy step after another, with the heavy fur coats shielding them from the worst of the elements. Silvia had taught him the trick of the blizzard during his brief interlude in the academy before. Without it he doubted he could have found the place. The first time he had been there was with the aid of one of Rasputin's agents. If he had tried to use one of those now he would've been attacked within moments of stepping out of the office. It was a gamble, but they had no better options.

The hour past faster than they thought it would. The endless and mind numbing repetition made the time fly by and before they knew it the snow lessened and the dark walls of the small castle loomed before them. They were about a mile away from Lake Baikal. An old place of magic in the wild Siberian plains and hidden beneath dozens of enchantments and protections. To the outside world the blizzard wasn't even there. Just an empty patch of trashed land marked by decades of muggle misuse on a once beautiful stretch of water.

Harry stopped his walk before the great walls and a moment later Ginny joined him. The wind had died down to where they no longer needed to shout at each other anymore.

"Is this it?" Ginny asked. "It's creepy."

"Take a closer look at the walls," he told her grimly. She did so and gasped, backing up against him.

"Are-are those...bones?!"

"Yeah. About four hundred years ago a shaman named Morgan-Kara went as bad as they can go. Worse than Voldemort. He slaughtered all the local tribes with his magic and built the walls of the castle with stones from the Lake and bones of the dead. It's a rather grotesque thing. Works well to keep visitors away. The inside is normal courtyard, gardens, warm baths. The Shaman just wanted his wall to be...special."

"That's...sick." Ginny replied with a swallow and averted her eyes from the grotesque creation.

"Keep your wand ready. There's a good chance they'll try to kill us as soon as we knock."

"You really know how to piss people off, Harry."

"Well, Silvia knows how to escalate things beyond reason."

Ginny smirked. "Wonder what she'll think of me."

Harry sighed. "Please don't rub it in, Ginny. If she gets going, she's the kind of girl to have you killed just to get your out of the way and feel dreadful about it later. She's beyond reasoning with when she's angry. And she gets mad easily."

"You really know how to ruin a girl's fun. There's nothing more satisfying than rubbing a relationship in an old lover's face."

"We weren't lovers!" Harry said in exasperation and began to walk around towards the massive gate.

"Same difference." Ginny adjusted her coat and kept her wand hidden in the sleeve. She was just playing with Harry to lighten her unease at entering this viper nest. Harry muttered something ahead of her. Something unflattering probably. "Did you say something?"

“Nope. Not me. Quiet as the wind.” The wind was still loud.

They eventually arrived at a large iron portcullis with a thick wooden door behind it. There was a heavy rope to the side with a knot at the bottom. “Get ready,” Harry told her and he pulled on the rope. A loud ringing sounded from somewhere over the walls and they waited. It took a good ten minutes, but finally a small door within the large door opened and a young man appeared. He was wearing deep grey robes with no adornments except an odd crest on the left breast that Ginny couldn’t make out. His dark hair was shaved to a stubble. His pale alabaster skin made him almost look like a ghostly skeleton with his sharp eyes sockets and high cheek bones. He made his greeting in a language neither of them knew.

“What?” Ginny asked in confusion

The man tilted his head slightly. “Who come to Castle Rasputin?” The man asked in a formal tone of broken English after her got no response. His accent deep and thick with the common Russian timber.

“Hello, Alexander. Still scrubbing the stones I see.” Harry said lightly. The man stiffened and his eyes went wide.

“You! How dare you! You warned! You for stupidity this time!” he drew his wand, but Ginny was quicker. With a blue flash the wand leapt from his hand and into hers

The man looked nonplussed and sneered. “Think that only wand in walls?”

Harry stepped between Ginny and Alexander and raised his hands. “Please, hear me out. I need to speak with the Master. It’s very urgent.”

“Ha!” Alexander laughed. “You speak to him when he raise soul to torment.”

"I came a long way and have placed my life in your hands for an audience. Ten minutes. That's all I ask. If he doesn't like what I have to say then he can, of course, kill me. I just need him to hear my words."

"We ordered to have head, moment you are seen!"

"Tell him Phyre has risen anew to take back his crown. He will see me."

Alexander looked at him suspiciously. He seemed to weigh the matter heavily and then gave a brief nod and shut the door in their face.

"Well that went better than I expected." Harry said with a little bounce.

"That was better?" Ginny looked over at him with disbelief.

"He agreed to carry the message. That was the first part. Even Rasputin will pause to take note of the name of Phyre. He's something of a historian. He'll know enough to at least listen to my words before lopping off my head."

"No one is touching your head, Harry. They do and I'll do worse than Dragons. I'll go take an entire nest of Chimera eggs this time and stuff them down his pants. Let's see how he likes bedding one of them."

Harry started to laugh and threw an arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "Gin, you're amazing, you know that?"

"Oh course," she said impishly. If she could have tossed her hair under the hood she would have. "But a girl still likes to hear these things." She gave him a flattering smile.

It was some thirty minutes later, they were almost frozen and had taken to running in place to keep limber, when the portcullis began to grind upward and the small door swung open. Alex appeared looking slightly disgruntled. "He agree to see you. Ten minute only. If he not pleased, it your head."

Harry nodded. "I understand. Thank you, Alexander. He won't be disappointed."

"That for him to decide. Follow." He stepped aside and they moved through the door, hearing the gate boom down behind them. There were three other wizards waiting on the other side, their wands out, but not pointed at them. The guards stepped around them and they began to herd them towards the Inner Sanctum.

Harry was right about it being a different world on the other side. It was warm with a breeze of fresh air that didn't threaten to freeze your lungs. The sun shone down on trimmed grass and a lovely garden that lined the walkway towards a pair of black oak doors. Ginny risked a glance at the outer wall and saw to her relief that you couldn't see the skeletons from inside.

Harry noticed that the guards were exceedingly careful not to disturb the variety of wildflowers on the sides. He remarked on it and Alexander shot him a dark look.

"Mistress Svetlana more temperamental after she come back. Her flowers are her love now. We not disturb."

Harry looked a little paranoid and anxious and started to dart glances up to the high windows. "Ahhh, she isn't here is she? It could cause trouble if she knew I was here. I'd rather avoid her if it's possible"

Alexander looked at him oddly and the other guards chuckled and said something in a language Ginny didn't know and a chorus of laughs broke out. Harry blushed and she had to elbow him in the side to get his attention.

"What did they say?" she asked.

"Err; well...I didn't understand it very well. I'm sure I heard it wrong."

One of the guards, more fluent in English than Alexander threw a leer towards Ginny, who still had her fur lined hood up to cover her face. "My friend said that if Mistress Svetlana found out that Harry was

here, at least he'd had a quick moment with a woman before he died."

Ginny's eyes flashed and she puffed up her chest to deliver a rather scathing verbiage on propriety. Harry's hand on her shoulder stopped her and sent him a scowl. She backed down. She understood she was the underdog here, but it wasn't easy to hear a stranger talk about her boyfriend that way. The men seemed to notice and their grins widened. Alexander's smile grew sinister with the possibilities of that touch.

"You are woman. Svetlana not like that. She be most irritable at mention of Harry with other woman. To see, curse, she would." The other guards laughed some more and Ginny swore they were making bets on her life from the way they were accessing her. With her cover blown she let her hood down and shook out her long red hair. It was damp and tangled with sweat and felt heavy on her head. The guards seemed to be looking at her rather appreciatively though and she noticed that Harry didn't like the looks she was getting.

They entered through the doors and were led through a maze of dim torch lit hallways. Ginny wanted to stop and examine a masterfully woven tapestry that showed a medieval inquisition, but was pushed along by their escort. Eventually they arrived in a large chamber with high-rise pillars that stretched upwards towards a cathedral like ceiling. Stained glass, similar to the Hogwarts Great Hall's, flowed with enchantments showing a warm summer day with fluffy clouds rolling through an azure sky. The artificial sun negated the need for torches, but Ginny noted that there were still dozens of deep shadows that was probably hiding more men, each with wand-happy hands.

Before they could take a couple steps past the door the escorts trained their wands on them and Alexander held out his hand. "Master demand wands. Give wand or give life."

Simple...to the point. Harry and Ginny gave over their defense with a masterful show of reluctance. In truth they had procured some crude secondary wands before coming here and those were the ones they



handed other. Their real wands were strapped to their arms in a special holster provided by Ron.

Once Alexander had their wands the escort stepped aside and led them to the front of the chamber. Behind a thick table of polish cheery wood sat Rasputin. Dark wizard extraordinaire, once mentor to Grindelwald, and one of the most infamous names in both muggle and wizard history. He looked just as Ginny expected; decrepit and sinister.

He was so old that his skin was a splashed with liver spots and a jaundiced yellow. It seemed to sag from his skeleton, looking nothing more than a thin skeleton with a wet shroud clinging limply to his bones. His white hair was long and wispy, falling almost to the floor with bald patches along his scalp like they had been yanked out by the roots in a fit of rage. Only his beard was full and thick and reached down as long as Dumbledore's ever did and braided together with a chain of silver and onyx studs. His grandiose robes were as dark as the deepest pit, but seemed to be coated with an iridescent substance; like a rainbow of stars against a night sky. Harry had told her that it was dragon bone that had crystallized after centuries of petrification under the earth.

She swallowed and even felt Harry shiver next to her. Rasputin's thin fingers leisurely slithered from the sleeves that hid them to pluck a grape from a platter of fruit in front of him. They waited in silence for long minutes, each acutely aware that the time was now ticking, but aware that they could not speak until spoken to. When he finally looked up after finishing the broken vine of fruit Ginny had to resist the urge to step back. His eyes! He had none! Instead were two black lenses that seemed fixed in the sockets. Ginny could see the scars of a terrible burning that had most likely taken his eyes. If she had not known Alastor Moody she would have thought this thing was blind. What a horror!

A raspy cackle like nails over a chalk board came from the man. "No, Ginevra Weasley. I am far from blind and am very much a horror. Remnants you see, of ignorant muggle fears."

Ginny flinched and quickly closed her eyes. Legilimency. She risked a look to Harry. She would have been angry with him except she noticed the clenched jaw. He didn't know. She put thoughts of the Council in the forefront of her mind and looked back at the Dark Wizard. Rasputin leaned back in his ornate chair and steeped his hands in front of him. Ginny could feel that his gaze was no longer on her, most likely Harry.

"You've grown in your powers of Occlumency, Mr. Potter. Not enough to block me if I so wished, but enough to stop a cursory attempt. But I think that is enough idle talk. I warned you the last we met that your life would be forfeit if you stepped foot into the Motherland again. Only your unusual message has bought your life for a time. Speak."

Harry, to Ginny surprise, gave a small bow. "Thank you, sir. My message got to the heart of the matter. The Council of Phyre is moving and will soon launch a war on the Ministry of England. After we fall they plan to move on the rest of the European nations."

Rasputin looked down and picked up a pear. His nails were easily two inches long and he used them to slice a piece off. "I care not for such trivialities. One government is as meddlesome as another. You wasted your life." Rasputin gestured towards the side and twelve men stepped forward and raised their wands.

Ginny stepped in front of Harry and threw her arms out. "Even if they plan to expose Magic and wage a world war on the muggles?!" she said desperately.

Harry hissed at her interruption and her protection, but held his breath. Rasputin raised his hand and the twelve men stopped and stepped back again.

"Perhaps I should hear more. From Mr. Potter, not from you, girl. Step aside."

Ginny raised her chin at the dismissal but Harry grabbed her arm tightly. "Ginny," he hissed in a whisper, "you're going to get us killed. Back off." She bit her lips but nodded and stepped behind her

boyfriend in the deferential gesture that Harry told her Rasputin preferred. Harry gave another bow.”

“Thank you for my life. It is as she said. Their plan, once they control the Ministries is to wage war on muggles. They recovered their ancestry and now have magic enough to challenge anyone. If they are not stopped it could spell the end of the Magical World. You, more than anyone, know that muggles can overcome magic enough to take down even the strongest wizard. Muggles have only grown stronger since your isolation. Once attacked, in their fear, they will pour all their resources into wiping us out or enslaving us for experiments. Muggles won’t allow for those with more power than them to live. It isn’t in their nature.”

Ginny was shocked at Harry’s words. She never thought him to be the kind of man to think so poorly of muggles. He always insisted that they were no different than wizards, except that they couldn’t perform magic. She was sorely disappointed. She did admit though, his words seemed to have an effect on the decaying old man in front of them.

Rasputin sat in silence for another minute. His face was tilted up towards the enchanted ceiling, lost in thought. Finally he slowly stood with the help of a gnarled staff and gingerly made his way over until he stood in front of them. Ginny wanted to gag. He smelled of decay and the faintest odor of burned skin. He reached out and grabbed Harry’s jaw. In a heart beat her real wand was in hand and pointed as the skeletal face.

“Let him go,” her voice was quiet and menacing. She felt more than saw the dozen or more wands suddenly pointed at this from all directions. Still, she kept hers trained on Rasputin. The tip inches away from his cheek. Though the face didn’t move she felt his cold glare crawl over her. Her hand wavered a bit, but never enough to miss the spell that was ready on her lips. She would make sure no magical aid would make let him see again. The gaze left her, but still the hand was still tightly on Harry’s jaw.

“You speak the truth. Or at least what you think is the truth. If they do indeed plan to move against the non magical world this could pose...problems. Very well. Your life is won.” With a quick twirl he

turned around and tossed the staff to Alexander who caught it, and with a glare at Harry slunk away to the shadows. Rasputin seems to rise from his hunched walk and return to the table with strong and sure steps.

It was all a game Ginny realized. He wanted to see if they still had their wands on them and she fell for it like a school girl. She cursed under her breath and felt Harry touch her lightly on the elbow and lead her towards the table. She tucked her wand away and took the seat that was offered. Harry decided to stand behind her and she felt comforted when his hands rested on her shoulders. He was making an open statement that they were together and he was not here for any machinations towards Silvia, or Svetlana as they called her here.

Rasputin told one of his servers to bring chilled wine for the three of them while they talked about the problem. He refused to speak at all until he was sufficiently embedded in his lavishments. Harry fidgeted while they waited. He was anxious to collect Silvia and get back to England. He was worried that there would be trouble while he was away and he felt he should be on hand to deal with it. The old man didn't seem to be in much of a rush however. In truth he never was. Harry mused that being that old probably tended to distort the perception of time.

Finally they had their silver goblets in front of them filled to the brim with a deep amber wine that was probably aged a hundred years or more. Ginny took a small sip to Harry's annoyance and perked up with a gentle smile. Her flighty moods at times were both a comfort and exasperating to him. One moment she was a fierce defender, ready to battle anything that came her way; and the next she was looking through dresses at a fashionable clothing store.

"Now," Rasputin pulled his attention away from Ginny, "If Phyre really intends to expose magic, why have you come here? Surely you don't expect me to go gallivanting off on an adventure like a young man. I've had my fun, it cost me my body and my eyes."

Harry took advantage of the wine in front of him to give him a moment to collect his words. "We do need help. The Ministry doesn't have the necessary experts to handle anything that might come up, and I'm

sure we can expect some rather risky situations. We came to ask you for Svetlana.” Harry knew that he hated for his granddaughter to be called Silvia so he wisely chose her real name.

Rasputin let the minutes tick by as he looked at Harry. Studying every expression and tick and throb that he could. “No,” he finally said, “She belongs here. Not fighting a war that she has nothing to do with. Besides, I don’t trust her with you, Mr. Potter. Her sense flies out the window with a mere mention of your name.”

Harry gritted his teeth a bit but remained calm. He expected this, now he just had to bring the old man towards his way of thinking. “Sir, with all due respect, maybe this is exactly what she needs. One day she will take your spot as head of this academy. Would it not be better that she saw more of the world and its people to better prepare her?”

“She has had the best instructors since she was little. She is sufficiently aware of the world to do the job.”

“Experience is always the best teacher. You yourself told me that when you used your magic on me. I learned the ins and outs of dark magic through yours spells. Not from the dusty books in your library. She needs a real crises and problems to deal with so that she doesn’t fumble when they come up.”

Rasputin waved that all away. “For one hundred years we haven’t had a threat on this school.”

“There will be though. If the Council has their way, they will either, come here and bend you to their will, or the muggles will come for their thwarted revenge. Especially the muggle government if they even heard a whisper of your existence. You are after all one of the most hated figures in their history.”

Ginny looked over at him in question. “Why is he hated?” she asked.

Harry looked at Rasputin and said, “He almost took over their government and was one of the most prominent causes of the revolution that ended the dynasty. Indeed he started it, behind the

scenes. As for the magical world he killed the Imperial family almost a hundred years ago.”

Ginny shivered and looked over to see Rasputin nodding. “Indeed,” he said, “It was business. The muggles had a son who was very sick. In exchange for saving him I was promised that he would be wed to my daughter, Maria. They broke our deal and had me poisoned, shot, stabbed, beaten, drowned and burned. As you can see. It takes more than muggles to kill me.” He laughed and Harry heard a tint of insanity in it. The man was slipping more and more every day. It would only be a few years now, maybe less before he passed. Harry figured the world would be better off.

“But, why kill the Imperial family of the magical world?” Ginny asked.

Rasputin gave a casual shrug. “They had ties with the muggle Empress. They tried to stop my revenge.”

“That’s...horrible.” Ginny gasped.

The old man leaned forward and pinned her with a glare. “So was their attempt to kill me. It was a different world back then you silly girl. You did not survive by holding onto such trivialities as morals. Right and wrong were much greyer than they are now.”

Harry placed his hand over hers to calm her down. They needed to get back on topic. “That’s in the past, and it’s the past that Phyre is trying to resurrect. Your...actions, will come back to haunt Svetlana, being the only survivor of your line.”

“And so you want to thrust her into that path? Place my lineage in danger?”

“No,” Harry said empathically. “I want to give her the fortitude and tools to deal with it when it comes. Besides. Wouldn’t you think it proper that it be she that helps to bring down your one time pupil? Irium?”

Rasputin seemed to freeze at the name. “He is involved in this? I thought him dead.”

Harry shook his head. "He is alive, I've met him. He is the Prime of the Council of Phyre. He tried to kidnap Svetlana once. Now that his son has abandoned him he wouldn't hesitate to take Svetlana again once he gains power. He has a grandson as well. A boy named Simon. Can you envision it, Grigori? You dying and Irium coming to claim your great grand-daughter. Enslaving and wedding her to Simon. Your name dwindling to nothing more than a pitiful and controlled puppet."

"Enough!" Rasputin slammed his hand on the table, silencing Harry. "Very well. She can go with you...but at a price."

Harry stiffened. "And that would be?"

Rasputin grinned; his broken teeth and blackened cavern of a mouth disgusting to see. "I have thought long and hard about the union she wished with you. I was and still am against it. It will never happen, but still. Your name and magical powers are formidable. A valuable asset."

Harry frowned. "What does this have to do with anything? I won't marry her. If that's what you want."

"Have you not heard me? I will not allow such a union."

"Then what is it you want?"

If anything his grin grew in such wickedness that it seemed to fill Harry's eyes. "A child. Give my Svetlana a child..."

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Irium stood on his balcony. Looking out across the vast mountain range towards the far distance. He could barely make out the Forbidden Forest and beyond that, the faintest of specks. Hogwarts.

Behind him, his chambers lit with the bright glow of a spell globe. On his ornate desk of polished white wood rested the Book of Phyre, still open after endless nights of studying and translation. Irium stood a moment longer and breathed in the fresh mountain air before turning and heading back inside.

He collapsed with a hacking cough and with shaking hands pulled the cork stopper from a steaming potion flask. He drank a sip and settled back while it works its miracles. Damn Potter. Damn his meddlesome ways and damn his endless protections. He had placed a cunningly devised mutating enchantment on the book that changed and hid whenever it was broken. Irium hadn't accounted for that and when he read a certain passage the magic had lashed out, crippling his body and almost killing him and The Book. Only the combined efforts of the council, using the lost technique of the ancestors, had saved him and more importantly The Book.

But Irium was broken. His body wreaked and left in ill health. That potion was the only thing that gave him strength. He required it once every hour, until the end of his days. Unless they could devise a magic to restore the very cells of his body that the curse permeated. He knew it was only a matter of time before they did, but he hated to be in this wretched, weakened state.

He pulled The Book towards him once more but was interrupted by his door banging open and his Second rushing in.

"Reverence!" he gushed out with excitement.

"Calm your self," he told the silver clad man. "Why are you so anxious?"

"Potter is out of the country. It's been confirmed."

Irium raised a brow. "Is that so?"

His Second nodded. "And so is that crazy old teacher of his. The one we fought against at the Pyramid? He was seen in Spain. This is the perfect time. It's rushed, I know, but think of it. We will have the run of the country and won't have to worry about their interference."



Irium leaned back and glanced at the book. He tucked a marker in and closed it carefully. "It is rushed indeed. A chance. Can we afford it?"

"I don't see why not. We were delaying to account for Potter's interference, but with him removed it puts us at an overwhelming advantage over the Ministry. The country will be ours within weeks. Maybe less."

Irium thought it sounded too good to be true. "Tell me, where was Potter spotted?"

His second consulted the scroll he had. "Siberia. He was seen hiring the services of a survivalist."

"Siberia?" Irium frowned. "Why would he be going-of course. Grigori!"

"Grigori?"

"Grigori Rasputin. He's gone to try and enlist that old man's help."

His Second shifted uneasily. "Would that be a problem?"

Irium nodded. "A big one. If he can draw that wicked old thing into the fight it could set us back a year or more. Grigori is not hounded by morals like Potter is. He would feel no remorse about sacrificing hundreds at a time to get to us; to me. This changes things. Do it. We have to keep the both of them away while we work. This is unexpected."

"How so?"

"I never expected Potter to have connections with one such as Grigori Rasputin. He seemed so...noble."

"So are you...at times. Too much so I think. You seem a lot alike."

Irium gave a chuckle. "Do we? Maybe it's just that we both live by principles in a world that refuses to. I respect him, even like him. He seems so much like my self when I was young and naïve."

"Don't let the others hear you say that. They all want him dead and don't understand why you let him live at the cave. It was the perfect opportunity to get rid of him."

"Perhaps," Irium agreed, "but we need to be more than a gang with a weapon. We must adhere to our laws or degenerate into common thugs. Principles guide the worthy to greatness. Do you think we should have killed him?"

"Yes. Principles and convictions should only extend so far as our goals. He is a threat, not a great one, now that we have the book, but he has enough power and resources to hinder or even disrupt our plans."

Irium sides and rubbed his tired eyes. "We can only see...do it. Begin the spell. I will join you shortly."

His Second bowed took two steps back and then turned, striding from the room. Irium stood up and moved towards his wardrobe. He took hold of his golden robes which were floating gently in the air and slipped them on. Drawing his wand out, he applied his obscuration spell and headed towards the chambers. His walk down the long steps was slow and careful. He tired quickly and he needed to conserve his strength for the work to come. He had to pause several times to rest. It was a long way to go.

When he finally arrived in the large room he was impressed by the haste that the Council had shown. They were already assembled and had drawn the necessary diagrams. Across the vast floor were carefully drawn runes, each touching at a certain angle, flowing into a large kaleidoscope of vibrant glowing colors. In the center was a clear and intricate representation of the British Isles, complete with The Channel. It was so precise that if you looked closely enough and zoomed in you could even see the Cliffs of Dover and every jutting boulder. Along the coasts, at precisely separated points, were little red pin pricks of light; throbbing with latent energy.

Irium stepped around the large marble columns and moved towards his place in the circle. "Is everything set?" He asked in his charmed voice that sounded like a spider across your skin.

One of the council gave a bow. "Yes, you're Reverence. The devices are in place. They have been tested and all are in working order and protected from attack.

Irium gave a satisfied nod and raised his hand. "Let's begin." The rest of the circle, including their newest member, raised theirs as well. Irium began to weave and dip his wand in small patterns. Glowing streams of silky smoke copied his movements and settled on everyone in the circle. A different rune for the number of additions. The book said it was possible to connect up to a hundred cores, but they had not yet deciphered the symbols necessary to unlock more than thirty. It was barely enough to do what they had planned.

Once he had linked the cores to himself he breathed in and felt his connection to the magic literally thrum inside of him. He was one with it. A creation of the magic. He was the magic. He drew strength from the others, for a time fixing his shattered health and pointed his wand at the Isle. He began to incant. Though no force was emitted from his wand, the tiny lights on the map began to glow brighter and change their color to a steady blue. One by one they began to light up. Irium repeated the same spell over and over changing the last word with a Latin numeral to represent the rejection point across the miles of the isles. He began to weaken and sway from the strain, sapping more of his, and the circles, energy. He was so fatigued now. He wanted nothing more than to curl up and sleep the week away, but he couldn't stop until every point was activated.

Finally. Over an hour later it was done. He collapsed in a heap to the ground after releasing the binding on The Council. All their stress was multiplied and sent back towards him. He barely had time to blink before he was asleep. His second moved quickly and levitated him with a spell. He turned towards their newest member, his silver robes still crisp and fresh.

“You will return to Malfoy Manor and await instructions. Your part to play is yet to come. They will eventually come after you. Lead them away. Do your job well and your family’s influence and wealth will be fully restored, greater than your father ever imagined.”

Behind the smoky mask Draco Malfoy gave a nod, his lips upturning just so. A drawling sneer. “Don’t worry. I know just how to play them. Especially Weasley.”

“This isn’t a game,” the Second snapped irritably. “Don’t fail us. You know what happened to O’Soule.”

Draco rolled his eyes. He hated threats. “His strength lie in staying in the shadows and when exposed lost it. I have no such weaknesses. I am a Malfoy.”

“A dead Malfoy if you fail us. Return now. The Ministry will soon notice what we have done. Be ready.”

Malfoy gathered himself and activated the port key in his pocket. With the tug at his navel he was soon back at Malfoy Manor and settling down for a grand feast.

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“I can’t believe his nerve!” Ginny said with such vehemence that, although Harry understood its source, surprised him to hear such hate spew from her mouth. “He thinks he can just barter away life like some-some...soul broker?!”

“That’s not really an apt description, Ginny.” He said trying to be patient. Trying was the key word as he was seething inside as well. A child. Rasputin wanted him to sleep with Silvia and give her a child. The thought was abhorrent to him.

"I can't believe your taking this so calmly," she said in exasperation. "You better not be thinking of accepting."

"Of course not. I just don't think sitting here for the next day talking about how foolish it is, is going to solve anything."

Ginny closed her eyes and took a few calming breaths and sat down. "You're right. It's just..."

"I know, Gin. I know."

Harry took the chance and looked around the room. After the initial outburst at hearing the price they had said they needed to think it over. Rasputin had graciously allowed them to stay in one of the rooms in the empty wing. As far from Silvia as possible to reduce the chance of her finding them here. The entire staff was ordered to keep her ignorant of the situation until Harry accepted. The room might as well been a prison. The underlying point being that if they did not accept the price then they, or at least Harry, would die.

Harry flipped over a painting on the wall to find no holes and all of the detection spells he and Ginny had cast; he was surprised by her selection that had exceeded even his own; had come up with nothing. When he asked her about it she said that the Quidditch league sends all their teams a special instructor to teach them everything possible to help keep their privacy. Especially the young women, as it was common for fans to try and sneak in to snap some nude photos of the players. If they got back Harry planned to find out who this man was and try to employ his services.

He finished his little tour of non magical inspection and thankfully sank down onto the plush bed. He was bone weary from the hike through the blizzard and the six hour drive before that. There was something about cars that just wore him out. A moment later Ginny lay next to him and draped an arm over his chest. He turned over and pulled her close, resting his forehead against hers.

"Knut for your thoughts?" he whispered.

"I don't want you to do this." Her eyes slid away from his.

"I may have to."

"No you don't. We can leave. Tonight."

"That's easier said than done and would put your head on the chopping block as well." He definitely didn't want that.

"It already is." She pulled herself closer against him.

"Not necessarily. Grigori doesn't have any qualms about killing, but he does only do it if there is a reason. He doesn't have a reason to kill you. You haven't done anything. Yet."

"I stuck a wand in his face and threatened him. That isn't reason enough?"

Harry flinched. "True. If he decided to look for an excuse that would be it." They lay in silence for a moment before Harry mentioned it again. "Gin, I may have to do this."

She closed her eyes tightly, trying to will the words out of her mind. "No, we can come up with another payment. Something he'll like more. We can think of something."

"I know this man, Ginny. If I don't do this then I know what his other price would be. Lily. It's this or nothing at all." His voice was close to breaking. If he went through with it then he risked losing Ginny forever. He'd make that sacrifice if he had to, but it didn't mean he'd do so gladly.

Ginny buried her head into his chest. She refused to cry. She would not cry. She was stronger than that. "We don't have to decide tonight do we?" she asked. "We can sleep on it and talk about it in the morning."

Harry ran a hand through her lovely hair and sighed. He gathered her up and pressed her against him as hard as he could. "No. We don't have to. Let's go to sleep." He hoped it wouldn't be their last.

“Harry? Can you tell me something? I mean you don’t have to if you don’t want to, but...”

“Anything, Gin. Anything.”

“I’ve always wondered...what happened the night of the battle? Before you left. We all thought you were dead. We-I...”

“Oh...that.” Harry drew in a breath and held it. He was waiting for this question. He’d done his best to avoid it, but he supposed it was a good time to talk about it. “When Snape died, we were there. Hermione, Ron and me. He gave us some memories. His last act. I took them to Dumbledore’s Pensive and looked at them. A lot of things were private to him so I won’t talk about it, but there was this one memory of him and Dumbledore talking. Dumbledore said I was Voldemort’s last Horcrux. That a part of his soul was in me. He said that I had to die if I wanted to kill Voldemort.”

“But you didn’t. You lived.”

“No, Gin,” he shook his head. “I did. I went to him. I stood in front of him and let his curse hit me. I was dead.” He didn’t need to hear her sadness; he felt it in the small tremors of her body. “For one moment. A heartbeat really, I was dead. A corpse. But the Horcrux was destroyed. It died with the Killing Curse.”

“How...how did you live then?” she asked.

“Voldemort. When he took my blood in my fourth year, neither of us knew it but he made himself into my...Horcrux, but not the same. It’s hard to explain. He leashed me to life. Anchored my soul in my body. As long as he lived I couldn’t really die.”

Ginny gasped and pulled back. Her eyes were as wide and brilliant as the moon when she looked at him. “So that means you can’t die?!”

“No, I can die. All that ended when Voldemort died. My anchor was destroyed when he was.”

“Oh, I thought-” she broke off. She really didn’t know what to think.

"I understand. I was worried about that too."

They lay together for a bit longer. "What was it like? To die?" she really needed to know this question. Harry was hesitant. For some reason he felt that to answer would be to spoil some great big surprise and ruin the wonder. But again he could never deny her.

"It's peaceful. You go to a place. A place where you are sent off. It's all quiet and you wonder where you are at first. You don't feel dead. You don't feel different at all. Except a lot of your worries seem...less, somehow. Like they don't really matter. Kings Cross."

"What?" she furrowed her brows.

"That was my place. Where I could move on. Kings Cross. The train was there but no one was on it. It was steaming and ready to go. The whole place was a little smoky. Like it is on the first day. Most people don't, but I had a choice. All I had to do was get on the train and I would have..." he broke off, the words choking up in his throat.

She reached out and laid a hand on his cheek. "Would've what, Luv?"

"I'd of met my parents. Mum and Dad and Sirius. They would have been waiting for me. I know it. And it would have been at Hogwarts. We could have stayed there forever. I could have played Quidditch with my dad. Walked around the castle with my mum. Snuck into the kitchens at night with Sirius and he could have told me stories about his days as a Marauder. Just step on the train. That's all I had to do. I wanted to so bad. I didn't want to come back. I wanted it to end. To just move on and be a son. For the first time be a son and have my parents back." He was openly crying now. He didn't know the story would bring this up in him. He didn't know what was buried in his heart for the last seven years.

Ginny leaned over and kissed away a stray tear. "Why didn't you?"

"Voldemort wasn't dead. I still had to finish it. To protect you all. So I came back," he shrugged. "My sacrifice acted like my mother's. His



spells wouldn't work anymore. Only I died for everyone. No one anywhere could have been hurt by him anymore."

"Wow...that's just...I'm sorry," she simply said.

"For what?"

"That you gave that up. But I'm glad that you did. When you were laying there at his feet we didn't know what to think. I was so numb but hurting so much at the same time. I had nightmares for years after that. Mum used to stay up with me and hold me till I fell asleep again. Don't ever leave again, Harry. No matter what. Don't ever leave again."

"I won't, Ginny. I'll be here." he cupped her chin and laid a gentle kiss on her lips that deepened to a passionate fire. Until they were clutching each other desperately. Maybe there was hope for them yet, he wondered idly as they slipped into slumber. A long shot, but he was lucky.

Later as Ginny was sleeping he woke up. It was sometime late at night. He didn't know how long he was out, but Ginny was snoring softly. A little whistle through her nose that he found adorable. Her mouth was open slightly, begging to be kissed and her breath was warm on his face. He stared at her for a moment before he slipped carefully out of bed, lifting her arm and placing it around a pillow. He went to put on his clothes but realized they were still on; they had fallen asleep without taking them off. He shook his head at his stupidity and left the room.

He knew the way. He and Lily were given the run of this wing when they were here, years ago. It was eerie to walk the halls again, so late at night where the nighttime shadows danced like little goblins in the fluttering torchlight. Rasputin would still be up. He never slept. What he did with his time was anybody's guess, but Harry suspected it wasn't studying. The Old Man had long ago reached the pinnacle of the Dark Arts; having taught the likes of Grindelwald and written books that Voldemort himself had probably studied.

Harry slowly descended the steps, moving deeper into the castle towards the stuffy heat of its bowels, where the great fireplaces always burned. When he'd first found out who Rasputin was and who he had worked with those many years ago Harry was ready to plot to kill him. A source of evil and darkness he had thought. A root that needed to die to stop other dark wizards from rising. How silly and rash he was...

ooo

"Harry, sir?" little Lily tugged on his sleeve and he looked down with a smile. He was really fond of the girl. While he wasn't used to a kid being underfoot and bugging him all the time, he found to his delight that he looked forward to the times when she would pull at his hand and ask him something. Wonder of wonders.

"Please, Lily. Just Harry, and what is it?"

"Why do you want to hurt this man?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair and sat down and she eagerly climbed up his leg and settled into his lap. "Well, Lily, you remember the bad men that killed a lot of people back home?" She gave a solemn nod. "Well this man helped them. He wasn't there, but if he hadn't been around they might not have known how to hurt people as well as they did."

"So he hurt Papa Severus?"

Harry frowned. He wasn't explaining this right. "No. Not exactly, but he taught some men that taught the men who hurt Severus."

Lily frowned in a cute pout. "I don't understand."

Harry hugged her tightly. "I hope you never have to."

ooo

He paused at the door. He could see the glow of the fire creeping through the bottom. Feel the heat on the other side against the cool

dampness of the halls. All he needed was to go through. Why was it so hard? Why did every instinct scream at him to turn around? Was it survival or something else? Ginny? Could he do this to her?

ooo

Harry slipped down the stairs stunning a wayward apprentice who was lost in reading some book. He pressed against a notch in the wall; his invisibility cloak wrapped around him snugly. He had to hunch over to keep his feet from showing. He waited quietly while two students walked past, whispering to each other about which was the most useful curse. Cruciatus or Totalum Sopor. Harry idly wondered what Totalum Sopor was, but he'd used and felt Crucio and it was difficult to believe anything could be more fatal in battle than the pain it caused.

Lower he climbed. The door. Just on the other side was the last knot. The last little speck of Death Eaters and great Dark Wizards. He could do it. He had proved that even a young man could beat big bad dark wizards. He tucked away his invisibility cloak. and opened the door, his wand hidden in his sleeves.

Rasputin looked up in annoyance at the interruption. He was doing thing to a raven, it looked like he was gutting it alive over a large uncut ruby. When he saw that it was Harry his annoyance melted away to mirth. Harry knew that the man thought that Harry was trying to become his next great apprentice. To carry his work to the outside on the name of strength.

"Harry," his voice warm and surprisingly kind. "Come and join me. I was preparing this for your lesson tomorrow. Curse Gems. It's better to use human blood. Fresh and taken by force, but for the purpose of teach this is adequate. With this little masterpiece of magic you won't even need to be in the room for your work to be accomplished. Just set it by the threshold and when they walk in your spell will be unleashed."

Harry hesitated. It would be good to know this. How to stop something like this. Merlin knew the thought of an undetectable item casting a killing curse on him from anywhere was worth knowing

about. He frowned. It was always this way. He would be ready to deal with Rasputin but some other piece of Magic would prevent him. One more time. Just one more bit of knowledge then he would do it.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Rasputin asked. “You look distracted. Dabbling in the Dark Arts is never wise without your full concentration. I’ve told you this before.”

“It-It’s nothing,” Merlin, don’t let him hear it in your voice.

“Hmmm, it doesn’t sound like nothing. Is it Svetlana? I understand her beauty is impossible to ignore, but she is off limits, Harry. I told you this.”

“Well, sort of. I want to take her with me when I go.”

Rasputin gave an amused laugh. “Ah, Harry. It pleases me that my daughter can enchant you, but I can’t allow it. The price is far beyond your means.”

“What is it? The price?” he swallowed. Knowledge or salvation? Since when did such a choice become so hard for him?

Rasputin smiled. “You would have to defeat me, Harry. If you wanted to take her from me. From her home. And we both know that is beyond you. I am flattered that you hold my Svetlana in such regard, but your lesson awaits. Come. Join me.” He conjured a chair and pushed a book before it and pulled out another large ruby.

‘I want to see the whites of your eyes when I kill you Potter...’ the words of the Graveyard came back to haunt me. ‘Have it your way,’ he had told the snake. Ok then.

“I accept,” Harry said firmly.

“Hmm?” Rasputin looked up in question.

“Stupefy!” He shouted as hard as he could, pushing every bit of magic and concentration he could into the spell. He almost whooped

for joy when it slammed into Rasputin's chest. But the elation dropped away like water over a cliff.

The Old Man looked down at his chest and tilted his head. He brushed at his robes and smoothed out the few wrinkles it had caused, gave a tired sigh and looked at Harry with pity, even though he had no eyes. "Did you think that because you defeated Voldemort that you were ready to rid the world of dark wizards, Harry? Let me inform you of something, young man. My ambitious little apprentice. You were groomed since you were born to fight him. Molded and shaped into the perfect weapon, just for him. Every circumstance, occurrence and battle was in your favor. Your very birth was an attack on him. It was fate that created you just for that battle."

Harry sucked in a breath. "Confringo!" He brandished his wand and Rasputin waved his hand lazily and the spell fizzled away. Harry took a step back.

"Fate is not on your side here, Harry. It is done with you for the most part. You did what it wanted. From now on you have to earn your role as a wizard. Build up your skills. The thought of walking into a Dark Wizards room and trying to take him down with a stunning spell of that level? Oh, how I love your youthful naivety, little one. It is refreshing. Still, I will forgive you this once. Do not challenge me again, Harry, on your life. Come. We have a lesson." He turned back to the table and Harry, shaken to his core, numbly walked behind him.

ooo

Harry didn't come down here under stealth or guise this time. This time he came down in the open with the intent to betray. He prayed to god that Ginny would forgive him. He opened the door and stepped through, closing it quietly behind him. Rasputin looked up in annoyance, just like the last time.

"Mr. Potter," he said.

"Grigori," Harry acknowledge politely. "I've come for Silvia."

Rasputin looked annoyed at the name but then smiled a bit. "And the price?"

Harry closed his eyes. 'Run! Run! Don't do this!' the voice in his head screamed at him. "I accept. If it will bring Silvia I accept."

Rasputin let out a long pleased breath. "Gooooood," he said with a slow deliciousness. His lenses seemed feverish with anticipation for the child. "You can of course, have a part in his life. We can work out the details later, but he will ultimately be under our custody and educated in our ways."

Harry gave a nod. "Exitium!" he once again put forth all his power into the spell. Only this time it wasn't a stunner, but his strongest combat spell. Destructo might be able to blow things up like no wizards business, but this little jewel was vicious. Simple put it ruined a body when it strikes. Every organ gets damaged, even the skin. The bones fracture at several key points and the muscles and tendon are torn apart. He was willing to bet that even Rasputin didn't know this one.

The sightless cursed rippled its path towards the surprised Dark Wizard. Rasputin waved his wand and a shield appeared in front of him while his free hand flicked and the heavy desk bounced in to the air. The ruination curse rent through the desk, splintering the wood around the room and hit the shield, blowing through it. A heavy bright light caused Harry to shield his eyes for a moment as the spell did its work.

A shriek caused Harry to stiffen. His eyes popped open wide. From the haze of the spell and the debris of the desk Rasputin stepped forward. His off hand was blistered and looked to be broken, but as Harry watched in horror Rasputin mended it with a simple tap of his wand tip. A wave of terror; of inhuman panic; the kind that Gryffindor's are never supposed to feel, rose up like a yawning chasm inside of him. His knuckles turned bloodless he balled his fists so hard and his legs froze like a deer in headlights. He tried to move, tried to shake off the fear that had locked him in place but he was afraid that if he made a move or opened his mouth it would be to fall to his knees and whimper.

“Harry, Harry, Harry.” Rasputin’s voice was no longer the warm regard of a master to his apprentice, but the controlled anger of a murderer.

‘Run, Harry! Run!’ The voice in his head yelled at him. Ordered him to take his feet and flee, even if it was to get lost to the blizzard till he froze.

“Sadly sometimes I am too kind hearted when it comes to my granddaughters feelings. She would never forgive me for killing you.”

‘Why aren’t you moving? Get out of here!’ the voice continued to demand of him. He didn’t know why either.

Rasputin tilted his head and the sharp crack of his bones popping gave Harry a jolt. He was breathing rapidly now, trying to hide the sheer terror that was hammering at his chest and sudden sweat matted his head and stung his eyes.

The wrecked old thing licked his pale bloodless lips. “Pathetic. Svetlana will have to cope.” He raised his wand.

‘Run you fool! Run! Run! RUN! RUN!!!’ the voice was shrieking insanely now. Like a terrified animal pushing past its limits.

“Funis Fatum,” and four sickly black lines streaked towards Harry, with four tiny heads like the snapping jaws of a hound guiding their way.

ooo

Ginny woke up with a start. Something woke her up. Almost like a scream. She noticed that she had a pillow in her arms and not Harry’s warm body. “Harry?” she called out to the darkness but there was no answer. She reached forward but didn’t feel him on the other side of the bed. She groped for her wand and lit the room with a Lumos spell.

“Harry?” she called again and looked around. The room was empty. She gave a great yawning stretch and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She pushed her hair from the front of her face and took a closer

look. She noticed that the bags they had half opened before when coming to the room were closed and ready to go. Getting up, she sauntered to the window and looked at the room. It was a little past midnight. Where was Harry? She pattered to the bathroom and looked inside. The light was on, but was empty. A cold feeling clawed at her stomach and she felt a twist form in the pit.

“Please, Merlin,” she prayed, “Don’t let him have gone to her.” She twisted her long hair around her hand and gave a steady pull. She lit the torches in the room and whispered, “Nox,” shutting off her wand light. She sat on the bed and waited. Half of her wanted to run screaming for his name through the halls. To tell him not to touch her, not to kiss her. Not to even see her.

She got up and paced along the deep purple rug beside the red. She was being silly she knew. They needed all the allies they could get and from what Harry said, Silvia was one of the best around. It was just sex right? But it really wasn’t. It was his kid. His first biological child. Did that really matter to her? She gave him the promise rings for Christmas, but that was just so he wouldn’t press for something deeper. To give her time to sort things out. Did she really intend to use them? The bitch, Silvia. That rotting corpse, Rasputin. Why did they have to complicate something already extremely complicated?

“That’s it,” she muttered and marched towards the door. She would stop him if it killed her. She sat back down on the bed. Maybe not. Maybe it was best to just go to sleep and pretend she never knew he was gone. Knowing him, he would make up a lie so she didn’t feel bad, and tell her he worked out another deal with Rasputin. They could just pretend the whole thing never happened. No, if he had a kid running around out there it would eat at her forever. She stood up. She sat back down. It really wouldn’t be that bad. Lots of powerful, wealthy guys have an illegitimate kid running around. Harry would hardly be the first.

The first. She sighed. She was his first, in every way that counted. She took a long look at her wand. It needed polished. There were nicks from years of handling and a long scratch that spiraled half way around from an inch below the tip to the top of the handle. Some good hippogriff oil would do well with a cloth from Ollivander’s. Make



it glow again. "First huh?" she whispered. Well if she was his first then she guessed she also wanted-something thudded again the door. She broke off in her thoughts and walked over.

"Who is it?" she called out. There was no answer, but she could hear some scrapping sounds of the other side, like something was pawing at the door. It could have been anything. "Homenum Revelio," she cast and saw that it was one person sitting against the bottom of the door. She frowned and tilted the door open just a crack.

"Harry!" she shrieked and flung the door open. He collapsed to the ground and she fell beside him, pulling him into her arms. He was convulsing violently and gave a horse scream when she touched his side. She pulled her hand away and saw it was slick with something dark and wet. She pulled open his robes and gave a pitiful whimper. "Oh, baby..." There was a large oozing chunk of his skin missing roughly the size of her fist. Only instead of blood it was oozing something black and tarlike. She could see whatever it was flowing up his veins and arteries like thousands of little tentacles working their way in to spider web under his skin.

"G-G-Ginny," Harry gasped out and cracked open his eyes.

"H-Harry...I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, baby!" She was usually strong but couldn't stop a few tears from escaping. She was shaking almost as hard as he was and couldn't get her brain to function.

"B-B-BBbaag," She didn't bother to move, and summoned it almost by instinct. She tore it open, spilling open its contents across the cold floor.

"I-I've got the bag1 I've got the bag. What do you need? I don't know!"

"N-N-Note-N-Note-B-Book," He began to cough and retch and a small red froth bubbled at the corner of his lips. The lines where further up his chest and abdomen now. She didn't know why, but she felt that if they reached his heard he would die.

She scattered a few of the items around in a flurry until she grabbed hold of a small book bound in red leather. "Ok! I've got it! I've got it!" she cried frantically and looked into his face pleadingly. "Don't die, Harry tell me what to do. HARRY!"

He was breathing in and out panting hard, an unhealthy rasp with every exhale. He could barely keep his eyes open. She said something. What did she say? He tried to focus, but couldn't. Something about death. He knew about death alright. Faced it at the ripe old age of one. 'Harry!' he thought he heard a faint echo of someone calling him. Something hurt. Something was hurting bad. Oh yeah. He was hurt. He was trying to tell Ginny a spell. What was it again? Something in his notebook. It sure would be nice to sleep. 'HARRY!' He heard someone calling for him. Sounded like Ginny. He cracked open his eyes and saw that she was crying and shouting. Why was she so upset? She waved something red at him. He was so tired. He closed his eyes to go back to sleep something pushed at him though. Something didn't let him. It was that damn bird. It was calling to him. It kept whispering something over and over in his head. It was like a thousand chimers echoing the solution. In bewilderment he repeated it.

"What was that, Harry? Speak to me! Say it again I didn't understand you!"

"B-Blood-" he took a shuddering breath, "T-T-Tar..."

"Blood? Blood Tar? Blood Tar curse?! Ok, hold on!" She started to flip through the pages, skimming over the brief notes at the head listing what they were about. She started to grow frustrated, there was just so much! With her shaking hands and the haste that she was moving she accidentally tore some of the pages. She wondered why she cared in this situation, but she did. She blew a bang from her eyes and flipped past a page. She gasped and turned back. This was it. She read through to the incantation and counter curse.

### The Blood Tar Curse

This spell was created in 1848 by Haphrodedues the Vile after he observed one of his servants drown in a vat of lantern oil. Thinking it

was amusing to watch someone choke of the thick substance he modified a blood boiling spell to produce this nasty piece of work. Using the First Law of Elemental Transfiguration the Blood Tar Curse, when striking, places a Class D spell infection at the source that slowly thickens the blood until it is congealed into tar like thickness. There is no surviving the curse through normal body fortitude as it renders the heart unable to move the heavy mass through the body. If struck in the upper chest death is almost instantaneous as the blood in the heart can not be released and the backflow causes an internal hemorrhage. The closer to the heart the spell is the less time there is to effectively counter the spell. The counter curse is as follows...

Ginny read Harry's little side note.

When observing Grigori performing this spell on an ape, I was horrified. The amount of pain this spell causes is revolting. I hate the fact that magic like this exists, but at the same time I am grateful to know about it. I could have sworn I'd seen this spell used at the battle of Hogwarts. Maybe if I had known this, less people would have died...

She looked up at Harry as he gave a small cry and shuddered. "Hold on, Harry! You have to!" she told him and read the counter curse. She shuddered. From what she could tell from the wound it was a clean hit, so the notes said she would have to cut away the infection and then siphon out most of the magic with her wand.

She pulled more of his robes out of the way and readied her wand. "I'm sorry, Harry. This is going to hurt." she flicked her wand and conjured a small silver knife. She gritted her teeth and began to slice away the infected tissue. Harry began to scream and she clenched her teeth against the sound. She needed to keep going though, regardless. It was this or death. No real choice there. Harry began to thrash and she accidentally sliced too deep. She expected a great deal of blood to come out, but nothing did. The blood in that area was already too thick to move through the wound. She began to saw again at the toughened skin until most of it fell away. She then used the edge like a scraper to get the most she could. By this time Harry had passed out, but she could see he was still alive; barely.

She picked up her wand that she had discarded and pointed at the hole. "Aguamenti," she cast and cleaned the wound a bit. She inspected it a bit and saw that she had cleaned it away. She had cut far too deep for her comfort, but she couldn't worry too much about that. Harry would know what to do once she woke him up. "Minuos Tenuis," she dug her wand into the hole and waited, concentrating on the spell. She briefly began to see the black spidery lines that were close to his heart halt their movement and begin the slow crawl back towards the wound. The Counter Curse alone was a dangerous spell the book said. Tending to thin the blood to the point that it leaked out of the skin. However it was perfect to cure the Blood Tar curse as they almost balanced each other out.

Minutes later the spell was countered and she now had a new problem. Instead of not bleeding, his wound was now pumping it out at an alarming rate. Her eyes grew wide and he pressed her hands as hard as she could against the gushing, hoping to stop the bleeding somehow. Harry, though, was growing paler by the second and her tiny hands were large enough to cover the wound completely. The blood was leaking through her fingertips and pooling on the floor around her knees.

"Oh, what have I done!" she cried in despair. She pulled her crimson colors hands away and searched through the rummage of the split bag for the glinting bottle she had glimpsed before. There! She snatched it up and read the label. Essence of Dittany. She fumbled with the cork over and over again and finally resorted to using her wand to summon it out. She tossed her wand to the ground again and poured the liquid over the wound; emptying the entire bottle. Harry groaned a bit and she held his hand while she watched the medicine do its work. A loud hissing a steam erupted from where the Dittany touched and she watched in fascination as the skin seemed to grow and stretch till he was no longer bleeding. Ginny felt for his pulse, it was weak, but there.

A sob of relief escaping her, she collapsed against him and kissed her face over and over. "Harry? Can you hear me?" Nothing. He was out cold. She reached up and wiped some of the sweat away before she realized her hands were still slick and covered with Harry's blood.

The heavy coppery smell and the site made her swoon and she had to close her eyes and take several deep breaths to recover from the vertigo. She wiped her hands on her robes and realized a great deal of blood had spread out on the floor, soaking her knees and hem. She snatched up her wand, which was also lying in blood, and vanished as much as she could.

She levitated Harry as gently as she could and placed him on the bed. She tucked him under the cover and summoned some more blackest for good measure. When he was safely ensconced in the barrier of wool and warmth she staggered to the bathroom and washed her face. As she dried herself off with the hand towel she had time to reflect. It had only been minutes, but it felt like hours. 'What in the world happened?' she wondered as she tossed the blood stained thing to the floor. Her forehead was no longer smeared, but she looked a mess. Like she'd been in a battle. 'Is that what happened? Did Harry get into a fight?' She leaned in against the doorway and watched her beloved. His rising chest and shuddering breaths. His pale and clammy skin. It must have been that; a fight. But with who? Alexander? Silvia? Rasputin?

The stomping and hurried footsteps on several heavy men broke her from her musings. She pulled out and her and made sure the door was locked and warded. Not a second too soon as the sturdy wooden frame shuddered from the strength of the spell or body that was hurled against it. Quickly she went to the window and peered out. That was no good. There was nothing to climb on and they were a long way to the bottom.

"Open up, Potter!" she heard a voice snarl. "You won't get away this time!" another thud against the door and a small curse. Ginny pulled Harry from the bed to use it as a shield if they broke through. She winced as he thudded against the floor and gave a small groan.

"Sorry, Luv," she whispered to him and took a stance behind the bed. The only way out was through the door and she couldn't do that dragging Harry along. And if she did manage it, then what? She didn't know how to leave the castle. She was as good as trapped until Harry woke up. He'd know what to do. He always did.

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A/N - Now I KNOW you were all looking for a cat fight between Ginny and Silvia. As I said this chapter grew into such a monster that I had to split it up. The wonderous beginnings of those two WILL be in the next chapter. It's already written. Just waiting on editing.

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## Chapter 21

### A Gathering of Allies 2

Ron Weasley, Senior Auror and head of the newly created Special Division sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. He'd been up for almost forty-eight hours working out possible tactics and strategies to use against the Council. That's what the Special Division was. A small force assembled from the best the Ministry had to offer. Six Aurors, two magic theoreticians, the best of the Unspeakables, one expert from the Magic Damage Reversal Squad and a flighty young woman from the Department of Magical Creatures. Together they could cover almost anything thrown at them. Except of course a couple thousand Inferni, but they were working on that.

"Auror Weasley, sir?" His secretary asked. A severe woman in her mid thirties who reminded him of Hermione without a soft side.

"Yeah?"

"You should go home. Get some sleep."

"I'm almost done here. A few more hours." He repressed a yawn that rose up in him at the mention of a blessed bed.

She scowled and crossed her arms. "You said that sixteen hours ago. You may be able to keep going until summer comes and goes, but the rest of us cant. I found Redwood passed out not more than an hour ago."

Ron frowned. "You woke him up didn't you?"

Gertrude, that was her name, sighed in exasperation. "He was sleep walking!"

He blinked and would have laughed if he had the energy. He looked at his watch and let that yawn loose and gave a mighty stretch. "Maybe your right," he admitted. "A few hours of sleep sounds pretty good."

Gertrude gave a brisk nod and snatched up the papers at his desk. Placing them in a slim manila folder she moved to his cabinet and filed them away. An empty cabinet that was filling fast with half mad ideas, reports from the field and, budget commissions from the Ministry. Not that it was so much a budget, but a bank that he'd been given. To help spend some of the exorbitant amounts that were being thrown towards him, he'd immediately gone to his brother's George and Bill. He brought them onto the pay role and now Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes was in full production for the Ministry. All joke products were put aside and they were pumping out weapons and defense as fast as the small business could; which was considerable.

Ron stood up, gave Gertrude the order to send the rest of the squad home for sleep. He planned for everyone to be back in six hours. When he flooded home he saw Hermione sitting in her favorite chair grading some papers and going over the previous semester's work. She looked up with a smile as she stepped out of the fireplace.

"You're home..." she said fondly and set aside her work to give him a hug and a kiss. He cherished her lips and soft form for only a minute before the squealing enthusiastic voice of their daughter interrupted them with glee.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" she cried and latched herself firmly onto his leg.

Even though he felt as if he was one step from collapsing on the floor he reached down and picked up little Rose. Her short curly brown hair was pulled back and she was wearing a fluffy pink dress with a big heart in the front. Her little arms clasp behind his neck and she planted one of those special 'daddy' kisses on his cheek.

"How's my little garden gnome today?!" he said with a laugh and nuzzled her nose with his own.

Rose giggled and ducked her head. "I'm not a garden gnome, Daddy. I'm a girl!"

She had obviously developed her mother's brains and was growing rather articulate pretty quickly. Hermione was going to move her from



children's stories to short novels soon. Ron wondered how long it would be before she could read and talk better than him. "I don't know," he told her doubtfully. "Your head is shaped odd. You look like a gnome to me."

"Ron!" Hermione swatted his arm and tugged at one of Rose's curls. "Don't you listen to your big mean Daddy, Sweetheart. You're not a gnome."

Rose pouted at her father and gave him the puppy dog look. His heart melted and he planted a big wet kiss. "Ok, you're not a gnome. You're a pixie."

She giggled some more and blushed and Hermione just rolled her eyes and sighed. "Can you eat something?" she asked in concern. He looked a right mess with the bags under his eyes and messy hair.

Ron shook his head. "I'm going straight to bed sweetheart. We'll catch up before I go back in."

Hermione gave an understanding nod and took Rose off his hands. Their daughter placed her head on her shoulder and watched the conversation quietly. "When are you going back?" she asked.

"About six hours. We have to scout some possible areas and set up some more defenses around Muggle London. Too much area to cover and not enough people. Wake me up?"

Hermione nodded and gave him a tender kiss. "I'll have some food ready for you to take with you."

Ron's eyes came a light a bit. "A good roast and some potatoes?" he begged eagerly like a ten year old boy.

She winked at him. "Liver and onions," she promised him.

He drew a face and shuddered. "Yuck."

Hermione laughed and patted his shoulder. "I'll have your mom make something for you. It's been awhile since you've had one of her meals."

Ron sighed wistfully. "Thanks. It's been ages."

They chatted a bit more as she walked him to the bedroom and then sank gratefully onto the bed, his Ministry robes still on. Hermione took off his shoes and ran her hands through his hair. She loved how soft and thick it was. She watched him sleep for a moment longer and then carried Rose off for her daily nap. Once that was settled and her daughter was sleeping peacefully she flooed Molly for the meal and then settled down in her chair.

She was almost done with her work, three hours later, when a head popped in from the floo. "Auror Weasley?" The unfamiliar Ministry official called out. Hermione got up and walked into view and gave a scowl.

"He's sleeping. I'll take a message for him."

"It's most urgent that he comes in at once. A situation has developed that needs his attention."

Hermione sighed. "He's been up for almost two days straight. Can't it wait for a couple more hours?"

The man put on a haughty tone and lifted his nose into the air. "No it can not, Madame. He is to report in at once."

She tilted her head and raised a brow. She stared at the face while tapping her foot impatiently. The man grew irritated. "Well? Go get him." he ordered and she purposely sat back on the couch.

"Now, see here! I am a Ministry official and Mr. Weasley is a Ministry employee-"

"You couldn't possibly fathom how little that impresses me," she interrupted. "Now, if you really want me to wake up my husband after an exhausting stretch of work, you had better come up with a better

reason than, 'you're a ministry official.' You know who I am. You know who he is. Now spill."

The man's face lost his high nosed arrogant approach and grew anxious. "It's a matter of internal security, Mrs. Weasley. I can't reveal it in case the network is being monitored. Please," he begged, "he really needs to get here."

Hermione frowned and leaned forward. "Was there a message or code that you were informed to use?"

"Oh yes of course, let me think." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh yes. I was told to say that 'Whites opened with a gambit.'"

Hermione stood up quickly. "I'll get him at once. Next time it might be best to lose the attitude and just relay the message. I don't take kindly to demands in my house." The pompous little man flustered out an apology and thanked her for understanding. Once he had closed the connection she went to wake up her husband.

He was already deep into his usual giant-like snores, when she walked into the bedroom. He was sprawled eagle on top of the covers, face up. He looked so cute in his rumple Auror robes and an arm hanging over the edge. She hated to wake him up, but the message was clear. The Council had made its move. She stepped over and sat on the edge.

"Sweetheart?" she shook his shoulder gently. "Sweetie, you have to get up."

Ron grumbled a bit and let loose another harsh snore. She giggled behind her hand and shook him a bit harder. "Ron, you have to go to the office. Its time to get up." she said more forcefully. Still, Ron in the slumber of ages, didn't budge. Hermione sighed and pulled out her wand.

"Ron! Wake up!" A jet of cold water nailed him in the face and with a sputtered yell his eyes popped open and he flipped off the edge to land on the floor.

“Oi! What the bloody hell!” he roared and stood up. He wiped the water from his face and glared at her after taking a peek at the clock. “Come on, ‘Mione! It’s only been a couple of hours!”

She walked around the bed and took his hand. “Whites opened with a gambit.” she relayed to him. The signal that the Council had made the first contact and that it was an attack. Ron was instantly awake and went into action. She summoned a fresh robe from the closet for him and he threw it on.

“What’s happened?” he asked while he rushed into the adjoining bathroom and started to brush his teeth.

Hermione followed him and stood with her hand on the door handle. “I don’t know. They sent some newly hired clerk to tell us. He said it was urgent. He probably didn’t know himself.”

Ron rinsed out his mouth and dried his face. “Get to Hogwarts, take Rose with you. Make sure the students are safe and the staff knows to be on the lookout. Then try to get a hold of Harry and Dimplewat. Tell them to cut their trip short and to get back at once.” He rushed out of the room and she followed. “Then contact George and Bill. Tell them to get whatever they have made available for pickup. I’ll send someone to get the stuff.”

Hermione nodded briskly and picked up her own coat while he talked. He reached for the floo powder and she grabbed his hand. “Be careful,” she whispered.

Ron gave a cheeky grin and planted a deep kiss on her lips. He winked at her. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. Ministry of Magic!” he shouted and vanished in a flare of iridescent green fire before she could respond. She stared at the fireplace for long minutes before running to Rose’s room. Her husband needed her and she would be ready.

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The first thing Ron did as he arrived in his office was take a draught of Pepper-up potion that he had stored in a flask in his desk. Seconds

later Gertrude, looking every bit as tired as him, bustled into his office, followed by Flockhaven, one of the other Aurors and his second.

“Bout time you showed up!” Gertrude snapped at him. She had a small mountain of papers in her hand with about twenty Ministry memos flying around her head. One was beating itself against her temple.

“Don’t mind her, sir,” Flockhaven gave a cheeky leer at the secretary. “She’s just pissy because you got an extra half hour’s sleep.”

The woman in question gave him a scathing glare and set the papers on Ron’s desk, taking a seat. Flockhaven followed soon and pulled out a notepad that had a bunch of scribbled on it. No sooner than Ron had opened his mouth to ask for a report than about fifty memos of his own zoomed through the door and created a cloud of paper around his head.

Ron cursed and tried to wave them off, but they dodged all his efforts. Finally he grew frustrated and waved his wand around the room. “Flutarius Nul!” he snapped out angrily and all the memo’s, including the ones around Gertrude stopped and floated down to the floor.

“Hmm,” the homely woman frowned, “I’ll have to remember that one.”

Ron chuckled. “I had my wife look it up for me. Not something the department heads really want getting out because then no one would read their messages. Anyways, Report. What’s happened?”

Gertrude got her quill and notebook ready while Flockhaven got to the grim business of explanations. “We aren’t sure exactly. About an hour ago, DoM registered a huge spike in magic. Not localized, but across the entire Island. They tried to track the source down, but didn’t have much luck except it was somewhere in Scotland.”

“Hogwarts?” Ron asked.

“No,” Flockhaven shook his head, “we already contacted Headmistress McGonagall and she confirmed that the school wasn’t the source. After that didn’t work both the DoM and DoMAC worked

together to ascertain what exactly the surge did. They were just getting into the grit of it when the complaints from DMT came in. All of their portkeys leaving the country are suddenly failing.”

“Failing?” Ron asked curiously. “How can a portkey fail?”

Flockhaven set his face into a grimace. “Not just port-keys. Apparation isn’t working either. We tried to call the French ministry for help, but couldn’t get through. We sent some Owl’s, but they didn’t know where to go. Then the Muggle Prime Minister found some way to contact us. It seems that every Muggle airplane trying to leave or come into the country took a dive into the Atlantic. It’s horrible on their side. Calling it the worst act of terrorism ever seen. Thousands dead.”

“Bloody hell.” Ron’s face grew bloodless and he almost retched over the side into his trashcan. “What the hell are you saying?”

“We’re cut off. From everyone. No one can get in or out of the British Isles. Whatever that surge did, it isolated us from the rest of the world. Muggle and Magical.”

This time Ron did retch in his little trash bin. The self scourging metallic bucket immediately vanished it and filled the air with the faint smell of citrus. When Ron came back up Gertrude had a glass of water ready for.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized and gratefully downed the cool liquid.

“No need to be,” his secretary waved it off. “I did the same for longer.” Ron noticed a shiver run down her back. “All those muggles...dead or...”

Ron closed his eyes and tried to get his thoughts in order. “Ok, according to the Minister we have emergency command of all departments, only answerable to him. Get the team ready. Our first priority are the muggles. Get everyone you can. MLE, DoM, MAC-everyone. Send out teams and obviators with them. I don’t care if they sharpen quills; get ‘em out there and helping. Send the Aurors out in teams of three to all major magical communities. Have them keep an eye out for anything suspicious in case this is a distraction.”

"A distraction?!" Flockhaven choked. "If this is a distraction I'd hate to see what'll happen if they get serious. I mean think about it, Boss. They've basically warded the entire country. I've never even heard about anything like this. Not even in the Merlin stories."

"I know, but I don't want to see Hogsmead or any other place dead tomorrow morning because we didn't think they'd pull off two moves at once. Contact Gringotts. Let them know what's going on. The loss of business internationally will infuriate them. They've got the best ward and curse breakers in the world. Tell them if they can break this thing around the Island the Ministry will give them a one percent tax relief on all trade for five years. That oughta really get 'em moving."

Gertrude was scribbling furiously on her notepad while he spoke. "Then get in contact with St. Mungo's. Let them know that sooner or later someone will try to force their way through this ward and end up splinching themselves like Merlin's knotted beard. Am I forgetting anything?"

"Hogwarts," his second reminded him.

Ron thought of his lovely wife and daughter sitting anxiously in her living quarters of the staff wing. "Hogwarts had protections we can't even fathom. They'll have to fend for themselves for awhile. Still, see if you can't get whatever team that will be scouting out Hogsmead to drop by and let them know. Have them cancel all outside activities and lock all the doors. Professor McGonagall will know what to do."

"Yes, sir."

"All right then," Ron clapped his hands, "Get moving. Get this done immediately. Have the team assemble in the staff room in an hour. I'd like a progress report by that time on how the muggle relief is doing."

Gertrude and Flockhaven scurried quickly out of the room. Ron slouched in his chair and let his head fall in his hands. "Dear, Merlin. All those muggles..." He knew the council could be ruthless, his own time in a coma proved it; but he never imagined they would commit

wholesale slaughter like this. He only hoped it wasn't as bad as the first reports indicated.

He immediately put such concerns in the back of his mind and went about reading the various memos that were sent to him and replying as he could. He then sent 'recommendations' to several department heads, outlining the efforts his force planned to take. They all knew that right now he was calling the shots, but making it sound like a recommendation and not an order would spare the department heads' pride.

He had a meeting with the Minister and all of those said heads in ten minutes he noted. He gathered up his papers and reports that he had written up for the past week and gathered his cloak. He was just about to head out the door when Hermione's face faded into view in his fireplace.

"Ron!" she said urgently and he winced. He already knew what she was going to say.

"Let me guess: You can't reach Harry, right?"

She blinked and looked at him curiously. "That's right. How did you-"

"I can't go into too much detail right now, I have a meeting with Kingsley to get to, but the basic thing is the Island's been warded to stop all communication and travel. Port-keys, apparition, owls-everything. It's all been stopped."

Hermione gasped and unconsciously fingered her ring that she had bought from Harry awhile back. "That seems...incredible."

"It gets worse, but some Aurors are on their way to Hogsmead and plan to stop by the castle. They'll be able to tell you everything." He looked at his watch and then gave his wife a reassuring smile. "We'll get it all sorted out, don't you worry. In the mean time see if you can't round up some research on wards or barriers that can do something like this. Maybe we can apply the same methods to get something through to Harry."



“Ok, I’ll grab some seventh years and head to the library. Let me know everything later on?”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too. Good luck,” she said goodbye and closed the door. Ron rushed out of the office and towards the closest lift. He just made it and was the last to enter the Minister’s office. A guard on the outside closed and barred the door as strong as he could. It was a top secret meeting.

“Ron,” Kingsley motioned for him to take a seat, “glad you made it in time.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he replied as he took a seat and opened up a couple of his folders.

“Well, I assume everyone’s been briefed about the current situation. Let’s get on the same page, shall we?” Kingsley stood up and passed out several copies of the reports he’d been getting. Ron always appreciated that Kingsley was a hands on Minister. He always led the meetings and cut straight to the heart of the matter, not letting politics or paper pushing officials twist everything up. Ron read the reports while Shackleton briefed them all.

“Approximately two hours ago, DoM registered an enormous surge of Magic somewhere in Scotland. They immediately began working with MAC to pinpoint the location. Thirty minutes later Transportation began to receive complaints that none of their portkeys were working correctly. They sent a team to investigate and found that whenever they tried to key to the continent they would get bounced back to the starting location. Painfully. They said it was like running into a wall. Thirty minutes after that the Muggle Prime Minister used his portrait connection to inform me that six aero-planes, those are mechanical devices that muggles use to fly, went down both trying to enter and leave the country. By this time DoM and MAC ascertained that some new type of barrier was surrounding the whole of the British Isles, cutting us off from the rest of the world. Twenty minutes ago the Atlas squads registered several unforgivables being used at three separate locations. They immediately dispatched three separate groups to

apprehend the criminals. We haven't heard from any of them since. Pius sent a forth team to investigate their whereabouts, but they could find nothing. There were traces of a magical battle at each site, but no bodies."

"This is where we stand ladies and gentlemen. We are cut off from allies, a magical barrier is threatening to reveal us to the Muggles and twelve Aurors are missing. I want answers. Ron, what have you got for me?"

Ron was still in shock over the missing Aurors. He hadn't known about that. He quickly scrambled to recover and tell Kingsley of his actions so far. "I've sent my team to the various departments. They've begun to organize every employee of the Ministry, on duty or not to aid in the muggle relief. I think that should be our first priority. It's also my recommendation," he glanced to Pius, "that Auror teams, along with MLE, cover and patrol every magical community. If this is a distraction then we need all the forewarning we can get for an attack. Most of our defenses around London are in place, in case the Council decides to go for the head right off the bat. It will be tight though without the other European Ministries unable to offer us aid like we had planned on. I've also had word sent to Hogwarts and St. Mungos to prepare for attacks. We might get some fairly nasty surprises from apperation or port-keys, so I think MAC should have a team in reserve to help St. Mungos deal with them."

Ron shifted through his reports and pulled out a slightly wrinkled sheet. "Harry Potter is currently out of the country trying to recruit allies. My wife informed me just before this meeting that she was unable to contact him by any means. We have to assume that even magical creatures can't get through since his Phoenix, Sirius, was unable to leave as well. He had several weapons to help deal with The Council, so he could be out of the picture. It's another blow. I don't think the Map of Atlas should be counted on anymore as well. It seems obvious they used it as a trap to catch some of our men. We should increase security in the Ministry they might be interrogated for information. I've also sent a representative to the Goblins. The loss of business internationally is going to cost them a small fortune. I've took the liberty of offering them a one percent tax relief on business for five years if they can find a way to bring this ward or barrier down."

Kingsley sputtered a bit. "Five years! That's pretty extensive, Ron."

He nodded. "I agree, but I really wanted to get them rolling on this. We need every resource available to get whatever is keeping everyone out, down."

Kinsley thought about it for a bit and gave a reluctant nod. "I guess it can't be helped. Good thinking, Mr. Weasley. They are a part of the Ministry now, they need to help out. It might also just smooth over some of the rough relations we've been having. Good job. Ok everyone," he addressed the rest of the room. "You're all debriefed. I'm putting Mr. Weasley in charge of all emergency actions until this crisis is past. If he needs something done, have it done. Don't bother coming to me. He'll run everything he does through me, won't you, Ron?"

He nodded. "Of course, Minister."

"Good, now give us more ideas. We have a lot to do and no time to do it."

Ron couldn't agree more and they spent the next hour going over ideas, plans, and contingencies to get a bad situation straightened out.

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Ginny grunted as she wrapped the cloth tightly around her leg. Harry was laying in his blankets in a dark corner. The flight from their room was tough. When the three men had burst through the door, they came with spells blazing. Bone breaking curses, stunners, flares of purple fire and even the occasional Cruciatus. She had replied in kind with stunners, sleeping charms, reductos and banishing charms. When they were down and groaning the room was a disaster. The bed that Ginny had hid behind was reduced to kindling and cotton. As she carried Harry down the steps she applied freezing charms as she

went. She took grim satisfaction that any pursuit would most likely end up with a nasty fall and a few broken bones at the jarring end.

In the abandoned wing she found an old dusty bedroom full of dirty sheets that covered old rotted furniture and cobwebs that hung from the walls like a maze. She tried her best not to disturb anything as she dragged Harry along to hide the both of them in the shadows. Her leg was bleeding badly from where a large shard of wood from a shattered bedpost had stabbed her. She had pulled it out and did her best to stop the bleeding, but she needed a good healing charm before she got into another fight.

"Episkey," she incanted and dragged her wand over the edge of the wound. The spell did little, but still helped it enough so that she could move it a little without the bleeding resuming. She sighed and sagged against the moldy wall, lifting Harry's head into her lap.

"You've got to wake up soon," she whispered to him as she ran her fingers through his hair. He was looking better and better she had to admit. Although she couldn't see well in the gloom, she did notice he wasn't clammy or perspiring anymore and the wheezing breath was slow, but steady. She pulled her cloak tighter around her as the chilly night air came through the broken pane of a nearby window. In the reflected moonlight the cobwebs looked like searching fingers scraping across the walls, poised over her, ready to pounce. Against her will the exhaustion of the night, and the day before it, closed in on her and she drifted to sleep.

When she woke up it was still deep into the night. She doubted she had gotten more than an hour's rest when the door banged open and the lit point of a wand glared across the room. She hastily took out her wand and pulled herself deeper into the corner. She winced as her shoe scuffed along the stone and the searching wand swung in her direction. She was caught. Spot on. She raised her wand and readied to cast, but then the light swung away and towards another sound several feet to her left. She watched as the light fell on a large rat that was scuttling along the base of the floor, its dingy nose sniffing in the air and its beady red eyes turning towards the source of its enveloper. The wand swung a quick circle around the room and then vanished, the door slamming shut behind it. Ginny let out a breath

she hadn't known she was holding and slumped a bit, trying to still her racing heart.

"Is it gone?" Harry whispered. Ginny jumped a mile and barely stifled the scream that rose in her throat.

"Harry! You're awake!" she managed to gasp out, feeling like she had lost a half dozen years of her life in that one scare.

"The...door. Woke me." His voice still sounded tired and weak. Ginny tugged at the blankets and helped him to sit up.

"Well at least you didn't make a sound. It would've been a bad time," she admonished.

Harry gave a slight nod and braced himself against the wall. "I figured as much when I saw you had your wand out. What happened? Where are we?"

"I don't know what happened. I woke up in our room and you were gone. Then I find you half dead outside the door. Someone hit you with the Blood Tar curse. It was a close thing, but I managed to counter it."

"Good girl..." he smiled weakly.

She blushed, but in the darkness he couldn't see. "Alexander and some of his goons tried to get to you. I managed to stop them and carried you here. Been hiding here since. We're still in the abandoned wing. Some old bedroom that looks like it hasn't been touched in a hundred years."

Harry pulled his glasses off and cleaned them with the tips of his robe. He put them back on his scrunched up his nose and took them off again. "Blood..." he said in disgust.

"Sorry," she apologized, "I didn't think about your glasses. Here," she handed him the leftover scrape of her blouse that she used to tie around her leg wound.

Harry nodded gratefully and spit on his glasses and wiped them clean. When he put them back on he took a look around the room and felt for his wand. "Have my wand?" he asked when he couldn't find it in his pockets.

"Oh yeah, here. Didn't want it to get broken in case I dropped you or something." She pulled his thin holly stick from the front of her robes and handed it over. He raised a brow at the choice of her holder and she sniffed, looking away.

"Thanks." Harry lit his wand with a simple flick and looked himself over. His robes were torn in several places and seemed to be hanging onto him by a thread. He took a look at the throbbing wound on his side and saw the marks of Essence of Dittany. The pale and grayish stretched skin that left a small hollow. That would be one noticeable scar. Then his eyes fell on the stretch of white cloth that was bound around Ginny's leg. Slightly red with soaked blood.

"You're hurt!" he whispered in worry and reached out for the wound. Ginny caught his hand before he could touch it.

"I'm fine. The bleedings stopped. Hurts like a bludger though."

Harry looked at her worriedly and gave a nod. He passed his wand over the wound and muttered a small pain relieving spell. "I'm sorry..." he said once the work was done and she was sighing pleasantly.

Ginny cocked a brow at him and frowned. "Not your apologizing mode again, Harry. Just what the hell happened?"

He blew out a breath and leaned his head against the wall. "I got into a duel with Grigori."

Ginny shook her head. "I thought that might have been it. Either that or Silvia. And since I doubt you'd go hurting the person we needed help from and Alexander came barging into our room like a wild badger, he was the only thing left...Is...is he dead?" she asked, scared of the answer.

Harry hesitated in the silver outline of the moonlight. "Yeah," he finally gave a small nod.

Ginny closed her eyes and cringed on the inside. "Did it have to be that way? I mean ...kill him?"

Harry sat up a bit more and shook his head. "I didn't kill him. At least I don't think I did. I tried to at first - or at least injure him enough that we could grab Silvia and get out of here, but I failed. He was too strong. He took my best spell and just looked at me. He was a scary wizard, Gin. I mean Voldemort was scary too, he had those eyes and that voice, but Rasputin... He had this...way about him. Like he'd been steeped in darkness for so long that he didn't need to do evil things to prove how bad it was. He just knew his soul was rotted."

"If you didn't kill him..." she wondered.

"It was luck. Pure luck. I've never been so lucky in my life. Never. I was as good as dead, Ginny. I missed with my first spell and that was the only chance I'd get at him. He hit me with a couple of dark spells that I'd never even heard of before, then with the Blood Tar curse. I was down on the ground with my wand was half way across the floor. I was pretty much dead from the previous curses before, but he was going to rub it in. He's not a big talker, so he was probably going to use Cruciatus or something. So there I was a second away from death. Then...BAM! A flash of light and he fell over dead. Yeah," he said at her confused look with a nervous bark of a laugh, "turns out my first spell cracked one of his experiments. Bloody thing exploded and put a splinter the size of my thumb right here," he tapped his temple.

Ginny's jaw hung open and she blinked several times. "You're kidding me," she finally managed to say.

"Ha! That's exactly what I said to myself when I saw what happened. I dragged myself back up to our room and the last thing I remember is falling against the door. Then I wake up here," he waved around the room.

Ginny shook her head in wonderment, then sent a slight glare at Harry. "If we get out of this, we are going to talk about your little adventure. I was worried and scared half to death when you came in covered in blood and those black lines were running up your skin. There had to have been another way, Harry."

"Yeah, maybe there was, but we couldn't think of one remember? Rasputin once told me I could get Silvia out of this nightmare only if I defeated him. Well, he's...he's dead, so..." Harry swallowed.

Ginny watched him sadly for a moment before ducking her head. "What do we do now?" she finally asked.

He tried to stand up, but found that his legs were really weak. He needed to rest a bit and eat something. "Did you bring the bag?" he asked. There was a small dose of pepper-up that would help him.

"Umm, no. I sort of left it all there in the room," she sheepishly replied.

Harry groaned and banged his head against the wall. He winced as the room suddenly swung around. "Whoa, bad idea," and he slumped back down again.

"Don't push yourself, Harry. You need to rest some more."

"No time," he replied and forced himself to stand in spite of the twirling walls and churning stomach. "We have to get to Silvia and convince her to come with us."

"She probably thinks you killed her Grandfather, Harry. Do you really think she's going to help us now? She'll probably just attack us."

"I know Silvia. She left no speck of her life untold when she tried to...well...Get me to marry her." He looked away after seeing Ginny's face set into a slight scowl. "She holds no love for or this place. She just feels some obligation to it. With him gone, she'll probably run off to America to live some glamorous life in New York. I think she'll be eager to fight The Council with us, just for the thrill."



Ginny scoffed and folded her arms when she stood up. "I hardly think a life or death fight is thrilling, Harry."

He tried to pop a cocky stance, but the fact that he had to put a hand on the wall ruined it. "I don't know about that. Life always seems kind of grey without a good fight to spice it up. Or a little bit of red," he winked at her.

Ginny rolled her eyes and dusted the both of them off with her wand. "Later, Potter. You can have all the fun with me you want after we get back home. I'll even let you do a little in front of Silvia. Just get us out of here."

Harry gave a cocky grin and salute to her, but inwardly promised never to openly display any affection towards Ginny in front of Silvia. That was one cat fight he'd move mountains to avoid.

They decided to cut the useless banter and once he found his legs again they ducked out of the moldy-webbed room and into the silent dark halls of The Academy. The place was as silent and eerie as a grave with each shadow a threat and every sound an attack. Slowly they moved, with their wands ready to cast lights of violence at anything that dared to impede their goal. Silvia.

They met their first piece of resistance as they crept down the stairs towards the master hall that connected the various wings of the castle. Two wizards and a witch were hiding behind the wind billowed tapestries that decorated the cold gloomy walls. The witch, a haggard looking crow of a woman came at them from behind with a flurry of cutting charms. Harry and Ginny ducked and turned swiftly, raising their wands and casting. The red glow of the two powerful stunners lifted her up and blasted against the wall. The distraction was all the two men needed to duck from behind their cover.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" They shouted and the rushing sound of green death flew through the air. The two of them tried to dodge away, but failed. The killing spell struck them both in the side and they instantly slumped to the ground, motionless.

“HA!” The hateful voice of Alexander laughed as he stepped from the caliginous shadows. His face was twisted in perverse glee as he and his partner stepped over to the two bodies. They conversed quickly in their language, obviously jesting over their victory, but it was short lived.

“Sectum Sempra!” Harry turned over quickly and flicked his wand. Three of Alexander’s fingers fell away by the sword cutting charm. While Ginny used her strongest banishing hex on the other Academy member. He lanced through the air and struck the wall with a sickening crunch. When he landed he slid to the ground, his head at an odd angle.

“H-How?” Alexander asked in disbelief, his surprise so total that he barely registered the pain radiating from his hand.

Harry face was full of murderous rage at the casual use of the killing spell that was directed, not at him, but at Ginny. He reached into his robes and pulled out a necklace that held a large amulet that shimmered with a bright green in the night eclipsed castle. “That spell doesn’t work on me or my friends,” he dangled it a bit before tucking it safely away again.

Ginny slid up beside him and leveled her wand at the would be murdered. “Harry developed a protection that heals instead of kills when someone uses The Killing Curse.”

Harry, feeling invigorated and full of energy pushed his wand against Alexander’s throat making his choke from the pressure. “You’re all alike, you know. You dark wizards. In the end you almost always fall back to killing someone. It isn’t enough to disarm them or stun them. No, you have to take a life. I don’t get it. You’d think you’d value life a bit more after knowing how easy it is to take away,” He pressed his wand harder, drawing a spot of blood as he backed Alexander against the wall. “I should kill you too, since you tried to kill us. Did it feel good, Alex? That rush and thrill from killing a man?”

“Harry...” Ginny placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him down, but he shook her off.

"No! He tried to kill you, Ginny. Who knows who else he might try to kill another day."

"It was the plan, Harry. We both knew they would use that spell at some point. We wanted to get hit by it remember? It was the best way to heal us up and give us the strength to get out of here."

Harry growled in his throat. "It doesn't change the fact that they wanted you dead. That he tried to kill you!"

"No...it doesn't. But...I think that other man's dead from my banishing charm. I don't feel too good right now and I'll probably feel a whole lot worse later. Don't become some kind of executioner, Harry. Once you starting killing people just because they hurt you, is one step away from Tom. Isn't that how he started? With his father?"

She took his trembling wand hand and pulled it gently away, then leaned over and whispered something in his ear. "Before you try to kill him, I'd advise you to think about what you're doing...Think and try for some remorse, Harry."

He recoiled from the words and started in shocked horror at her grim face. His own words that he had spoken to Voldemort in those final minutes, thrown back at him. An accusation if he had ever heard any.

"That's not fair, Ginny. This is different."

She didn't say anything, but just touched his cheek in that familiar gesture. Harry's eyes flicked between her, Alexander, and his wand, a multitude of times before he finally stepped away.

"You're right," he finally said. "Maybe it's become too easy for me to make the choice to kill."

"No, Harry," she said with a surprising amount of love that he hadn't been sure she felt for him, "I don't think it's easy for you. I just think you're too worried about what men like him might do in the future. You've forgotten the pattern. It's hard to stop the chain once it's begun. Rasputin is dead, so they tried to kill us. So you try to kill them, and so on and so forth. Just let it go, Luv."

Harry closed his eyes and gave a jerk of his head towards the double large doors that led to the courtyard. "Go, Alex. Get out of here and think about a different line of work. I've seen what happens to dark wizards too many times for comfort. She's right. It all ends in death."

Alexander, who was watching the conversation with a changing expression of shock, relief and confusion, looked at the door with a small longing. "You let go? Just like that, I go?"

Ginny raised her own wand against him this time. "Yeah, 'you go. Just like that.' Don't try anything funny. I stopped him once. Try to kill us again and I won't. So go and forget about us. Find a nice girl and get a good job. Go on, go," she insisted when he hesitated.

Alexander didn't need to be told a third time and he rushed down the stairs towards the doors, his foot steps seeming overly loud in the echoing vastness of the hall. When he vanished through the door with a resounding boom, Ginny sagged against Harry and he, her. She reached into her blouse and pulled out the pendant that was a clone of Harry's.

"I can't believe these actually work," she said in a loud whisper, while rubbing her thumb over the large emerald. More to herself than to the man beside her. "I mean, The Killing Curse - no longer death, but can actually help people. I'll admit I was scared they wouldn't."

Harry touched her on the shoulder and motioned towards the fall hallway. "Let's go. Someone will be here soon from all the noise."

She shook herself out of her revelry and gave a nod and together ran up a small set of stairs and into the darkened passage of the wing that Silvia lived in. They could tell the difference immediately. Instead of the dour and decaying atmosphere of the abandonment that they had left, the hallways were rich and lustrous with culture and wealth. Paintings of green landscapes with rolling hills and sparking waterfalls; Soft and deep rugs of rose red was trampled by their dirt and blood caked feet as they stomped along in their haste.

“Well, I can see your ‘Princess’ is no stranger to poverty,” Ginny remarked sarcastically as she noticed the lamps of pure gold that hung from the ceiling.

Harry ignored the remark and stopped at a crossway to look left and right. He seemed to strain in his memory, to dig out the directions of so long ago. He finally took off down the right passageway with Ginny covering their rear. The doors that they passed seemed to grow fewer and far between, a hint that the rooms were growing larger the deeper they went. He noticed of signs that he was on the right track, when one of Silvia’s maids rounded a corner and gave a small scream at the sight of Harry, then collapsed as a stunner caught her in the stomach.

The hallway dead ended at a slender seeming door of bright oak and white gold adornments. Harry hesitated a second and gave Ginny a look that plainly said, ‘cause no trouble’. She looked away pretending not to notice and he rolled his eyes, horrors of confrontations and hair pulling flashing through his mind. He noticed a light peeking through the doorframe. She was obviously up, which was a good thing. He turned the knob and marched in without knocking.

There she was, sitting in a plush chair reading a slim, leather bound book. When Ginny caught sight of her she couldn’t help but stare in sinking despair. There weren’t words to adequately describe the utter perfectness of the woman. Hair as dark and thick as a blanket of midnight that cascaded to the floor like a dress of black silk. Her skin a flawless alabaster and pearl, smooth and soft. Her poise, even while seated was of grace and royalty; charm and elegance. Ginny could only think that she was sensuous personified. Whatever hate she held in her heart for this woman bloomed and grew like a spring leaf, till it was unfurled and before her in all its glory. She was jealous, envious, and resentful, and felt completely worthless, ugly, and insecure in front of this portrait of womanly perfection.

Silvia looked up in annoyance at the intrusion and her eyes widened at the sight of Harry, barging into her chambers unannounced, battle scared, with bloody and torn robes. Like some knight of old fighting his way through a host of enemies for his one true love.

"Hello, Silvia. It's been awhile," Harry said with caution, eyes darting around for any bodyguards or servants ready to rush out.

Silvia slowly stood with a dreamlike cast to her face. The book fell limply from her powerless hands to land softly in the deep blue carpet.

"Is this real?" she asked softly; her sapphire eyes locked firmly on Harry, drinking the dream in.

"Yeah. I'm here. It's good to see you," he replied, and flattered her with a friendly smile.

Silvia took a half step forward. "You...You came for me..." her whisper sounding like a starved child thanking a man for food.

"Ah, not exactly," Harry managed to say, but broke off as she launched herself across the room towards her love. Her dark hair fanned and waved out behind her like a sea of shadow on an ocean tide. Before they knew it she had her slender arm around firmly around his neck and was pulling him down for a kiss, her eyes already lidded in expectation of the embrace.

Ginny saw red. Before she knew it she had her wand ready and a spell on her lips. "You finish that kiss, girl and I'll shave your head bald!" she said tightly, more than ready to risk life and limb to declare that Harry was her's and her's alone.

Silvia paused in her movement and slowly turned her head. Her eyes narrowed to slits as they two women met for the first time. Harry tried to pry her arms away, but she was like a cat with her claws sunk for the ride. Sensually, she brought her body against Harry's and her cheek against his chest. All the while looking straight at Ginny.

"My love," her voice silken with hidden jealousy and menace, "One of the local whores seems to have come begging. Why don't you pay the poor wretch and send her on her way. She obviously needs the money." Her lips quirked slightly with wicked mirth.

Ginny's eyes widened with barely suppressed rage at the insult. Then seemed to melt away into sinister calculation. Her head tilted and she

looked Silvia up and down slowly. "No, Harry. Save your money and get Svetlana here some medicine. She looks like a corpse. Positively, sickly. We should get her to a hospital quickly. Before she...dies."

Silvia's smile faltered a second and she clenched her jaw. "My, my, Love. The tart has a tongue. No doubt perfected from...endless use."

Ginny's wand twitched, but Harry finally escaped her grasp and imposed himself between the two women. "Ladies, please."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny continued and peeked around her lover to look Silvia straight in the eye, "Always the perfect gentleman. Protecting the weak and helpless. You know, Silvia. You really should stop taking beauty potions. They're obviously making you age faster."

Silvia's face flushed red with anger and she hissed with malice. In a blink her wand was out and in the potion of a spell, before Harry caught both their wands, mid slice. "Move, Harry," she said savagely, "I'll teach this knicker-dropping little girl some respect!"

"Ha!" Ginny laughed. "That's a rich coming from some powder-puff princess, who can't keep a man!"

Silvia screamed in rage and snatched her wand back and opened her mouth to deliver a lethal spell.

"SHUT UP! THE BOTH OF YOU!" Harry shouted. She stopped and looked at the storming man in surprise. "Honestly! If I didn't know better I could swear I was watching my first year Gryffindor/Slytherin class. A pair of ten year olds, the both of you!"

"Don't you 'dare' take her side, Harry Potter!" Ginny fumed at her boyfriend. "And how could you let her touch you like that?"

"I didn't 'let' her touch me like that...Oh, what use is there explaining. I'll be wrong no matter what." He turned his back on a highly affronted Ginny and faced down Silvia with a determined glare. "As for you, I'm sorry Silvia, but Ginny is right. I'm with her now, for better or worse. I came to ask you for help."

"Help?" she spat. "Help? Have I ever given you the notion that I'm the helping kind? You come to me with some trumped up harlot on your arm, knowing how I feel about you, and you want me to help? How dare you!"

He sighed sadly and turned away to shut the door, locking it after them. "Silvia. I'm sorry I don't feel the same as you do. I told you all this long ago. Simply wanting something to be doesn't always make it happen. You used me, violated me and stalked me around the world. Did you somehow think that would endear me to you?" He looked at her in pity and shook his head. "No. Still I am fond of you in my own way and I've come here with an offer. A chance. I'd like you to listen."

"If you are not willing to throw that whore aside and stand by me, then I have no interest until you do!"

"Whore?!" Ginny said venomously and tried to step around Harry, but he held her back.

"Don't call her that, Silvia! She is a wonderful person and I love her! I tried to be nice, but you're being childish. Sit! Listen!" he ordered harshly and to her own surprise she found herself falling back into the chair automatically. She opened her mouth to give some retort, but at the angry look on her beloved's face she fell silent.

"Now, before anything I think you should know that Grigori is dead."

Silvia brought a hand to her mouth in horror. "What? How? When?"

He sighed and sat in a chair across from her. Ginny stayed by the door, although she was tempted to stand behind him and show her claim again. "Earlier," he said, "I needed your help and asked him if you could come back to England with me. He wanted something I couldn't give. I tried to duel him for the right, instead. One of our spells hit one of his experiments and there was...an accident."

Silvia collected herself a bit and narrowed her eyes, studying him. "That killed him? Not one of your spells?"

"Correct."



“Did you duel him with the intent to kill?” she asked fearfully.

“Yes and no,” he replied honestly, “I was hoping to just beat him, but I knew it might have come to a nasty end for either of us. I’m sorry.”

Silvia stood on unsteady legs and walked over to window and pushed the old medieval shutter open. The stars were like a million glittering jewels in the wilderness night. From there her gaze drifted into the far off. Into the unknown. Lands beyond hers that she had only traveled briefly in her search for Harry, years ago. She turned back and instead of looking angry or sad, she looked elated and relieved.

“I’m free? I can leave? With you?”

Harry gave a small smile and nodded. “If that’s your wish. We need-I need your help. There is a war brewing in England.”

“A war?” she said with girlish like enthusiasm, as if all thoughts of her great-grandfather’s death had already been put aside. “Will there be battles?”

Harry looked at her skeptically and was surprised at her reaction, even though he sort of expected it. “Err, yes, I expect there will be.”

“And I’ll get to fight?” she inched closer her hands clasped tightly in front of her chest. “See London? Hogwarts?”

He nodded again and gave a slight chuckle. “I’ll even give you’re a tour of England myself. All the best places.”

Silvia gave a falsely sweet smile while her eyes slide over to the door to see a furious Ginny glaring at them. “It’s a deal. I’ll come if you mean what you say. You give me the tour. Just you. Not...her.”

Ginny scoffed and was about to reply when she heard the far off sounds of many people running down the hall. “Harry,” she said, “their coming.”

He was up in a second and her wand was a blur. Ginny felt herself gently pushed aside and the door, old though still sturdy, seemed to buckle a bit and the frame started to glow a soft jade. A pair of spell wrought chains crossed themselves over the barred portal, further strengthening the wards he has just installed. He turned back to Silvia and motioned towards her bed room.

“That will hold them off for awhile. You need to get your things ready. We’ll need your emergency port-key to get out of here. We’ll never make it on foot. The entire school is on alert.”

Silvia nodded and walked calmly to her room to get prepared. Ginny stomped over to her beloved and yanked him around to face her. “Harry, she means for that tour to be a date. She’ll look into everything you say and do as a sign that you care for her. It’s a bad idea.”

“I don’t think so, Ginny. She just wants to use it as an opportunity to try and win me over.”

Ginny shook her head with a blend of frustration and pity. “That girl is absolutely besotted with you, Harry. Obsessive really. Dangerous. It may be that way at first, but she’ll grow more and more desperate as the days drag. Watch what you say and do, Harry. I love you, but I’m not about to take a curse in the back because some passion-starved fan girl wants you to herself.”

Harry laughed and pulled her into a hug. “I love you to. I’ll be careful. I promise.” He kissed her lightly and pulled away just as Silvia exited her room with a small bag in hand.

She was already changed with a deep fur coat that looked obscenely like real minx. She was changed out of her dress and her hair was redone in an intricate braid which hung in elaborate loops around her head and shoulders. “I’m ready, my beloved,” she smiled brightly at Harry.

He moaned to himself at her choice of words gave an absent nod and looked towards Ginny. He found her staring at Silvia enviously. “Gin? What’s wrong?” he whispered.

"Her hair...I 'have' to found out how she does it up so quickly. She wasn't even in there a minute..." her voice faded off.

He blinked; not understanding the significance of how impossible the feat seemed and shrugged it off as another of her quirks of personality. He gave a cursory examination of the room and took a glance at the door where the ward was just now beginning to fade under the counters being used on the other side. "We have to go. Silvia?"

"Yes," she answered primly and took off her bracelet. She tapped it with her wand and it was suddenly transfigured into a long wooden stick. "Take hold. It's a triggered key and it will take us to the muggle village near by. After that it's up to you"

The two nodded and walked over to grab the portkey. Silvia looked scathingly at Ginny for a moment, but then turned her adoring eyes on the dark haired man in front of her. "Harry Potter," she said the trigger and with the usual tug at their navel they shimmied through the corridors of magic and landed lightly in a deep snow mound. The night was bitter cold and struck them like a sudden plunge into the ocean. They had to leave most of their possessions behind, including their cloaks and furred boots that had kept them warm during the trip here.

Ginny blanched at the change and wasted to time in erecting a warming charm around the two of them. Silvia, she left to fend for herself since she was obviously prepared.

"Thanks," Harry's teeth chattered at her and she gave him a coy little wink that didn't go unnoticed by the odd woman out.

"Excellent warming charm," she said off-handedly. "We certainly don't want your frail body to catch a cold."

"No," Ginny replied in a little chirp, "we certainly don't. Else Harry might get sick when he ravages my body later today."

Silvia stared stonily at the temperamental red head and turned back to the man mentioned. "Well?" she said, dropping the subject. "Take me to England, Harry. We have a date to keep."

"It's not a date!" Ginny declared defensively. Silvia allowed herself a small smile.

Harry rolled his eyes and gave serious thought to leaving the both of them here to roll around in the snow pulling each other's hair out. "If you two are finished?" he asked, not expecting or wanting an answer. "I'll make a port-key to Hogsmead. From there we can walk to Hogwarts."

"Can't you just make one to Hogwarts?" Ginny asked.

"No. Only Minerva can do that. Else anyone can attack the school at any moment."

"Oh. Didn't think of that."

"Not surprising," Silvia remarked while adjusting her coat and hood.

Harry clamped a hand over Ginny's mouth as quick as he could and gave his girlfriend the most begging look her could. She sighed and gave a reluctant nod. 'Thanks,' he mouthed silently to her.

He wasted no time and took off one of his shoes and tapped it with his wand. "Portus," he incanted and the foot apparel glowed a bright azure. The three of them took hold; Silvia with such anticipation that she was almost drooling. Harry counted down from five and suddenly they were once again flashing through the ether on the roads of magic.

Something went wrong. A terrible red light filled their sights and they were suddenly jolted, like having hit a wall and then it ended and the three of them collapsed in a heap.

"What the hell?" Ginny and Harry remarked together and they tried to stand up. The three of them looked around to find they had arrived at the exact spot they had left from.

Silvia glared indignantly at Harry while she shook herself off. "I thought you knew how to make a proper port-key?" she asked not so nicely.

Harry stared bewildered at his shoe. "I do...I did. It should have worked."

"Try to get it right this time, Harry?" Ginny snapped out a rebuttal, feeling bruised by the rough trip.

"I-I'll try..." he replied, trying to sort out what happened. He picked the shoe up again and reapplied the traveling charm. They all took hold with glances of apprehension at the caster. They counted down, they flashed away and with a jarring red scene they fell once again at their departure point.

"Harry!" Ginny yelled at him while holding her side.

"It's not me!" he defended himself. "I'm positive I got it right!"

"We'll your obviously mistaken," a disheveled Russian princess argued from a sitting position.

"I'm serious! They port-key is fine! It should work!"

"Then how do you explain it?" Ginny asked nursing her bruised hip.

Harry thought for a moment and picked up the shoe to examine it. "If it was casted wrong we wouldn't have traveled at all. It tried to take us there, but...we were blocked."

"Blocked?" Silvia asked doubtfully. "Does this, Hogsmead have a ward around it?"

"Not normally. That's why the second key didn't go to Hogsmead. It went to Godric's Hollow." Harry pursed his lips and his face started to look ashen the more he thought about things. Ginny stood up and walked over to kneel beside him.

“Harry? Why can’t we get through? Is it too long of a way? Some ward from the castle interfering?”

He blew out a breath he didn’t know he was holding and picked up the shoe again. “I don’t think so. You ladies stay here for a moment. I need to test a theory.”

“Harry?” the two of them asked at the same time but he had already created another port-key and flashed away before they could stop him.

He didn’t come back. Ginny wringed her hands and stared at the spot endlessly as the minutes passed. Neither woman said a word and just waited. Hoped. Fifteen minutes later they saw the blue pulse and he appeared in front of them once more.

“Oh, thank god!” Ginny exclaimed and took a step forward, but Silvia beat her and she watched as the beauty’s slender arms wrapped up her boyfriend in a hug. She wanted to say something, do something, but at the moment she just didn’t really feel like starting anything. Harry was back. That was what mattered.

Once he disentangled himself from the Siberian Princess he seemed to hesitate and darted looks between the two of them.

“Harry?” Ginny asked, waiting. “Did it work? Did you get to Hogwarts?”

“No...” His voice was a far away whisper that was almost lost in the wind.

“Harry, you’re scaring me. Where did you go?”

He couldn’t seem to meet her eyes, but told her his theory anyways. “I went to Egypt and then to Australia and then to America. I tried from each spot to get back to England, but I meet with the same results. Like hitting a wall. It’s warded. The entire island. Ginny,” he raised his eyes and the look was of fear and hopelessness, “we can’t go home!”

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The sighs and moans swayed with the quiet rustle of the trees in the forbidden forest. The night of the new moon had just settled over the forbidden forest. Darkness so thick from the suffocating canopy that it was like its own world. A realm of shadow. The smoke from a doused fire had no one to smell it. The bodies of several dozen centaurs had no one to witness them. Every animal, magical and mundane had long since fled the tide of death that walked their slow, avalanching steps, over the broken roots and dead leaves. Around the thick tall trucks of the foreboding trees. A savage symphony of raspy moans, filled with an eternal hunger, meshed with chaos so complex that it was harmonious in its chilly prophecy. Onward the army of Inferni came. Thousands and Thousands more. Marching...and marching. The blood of the centaurs still dripping from their fingers and ravenous jaws. Slowly those corpses stirred. Slowly the eyes opened. Slowly they joined their cries with the others. And slowly they stood back up to march.

Miles away, the lights of Hogsmead slowly dwindled away as the population settled down to sleep restlessly.

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Please Review!

A/N - As I warned some people things are going to start getting...disturbing. It won't be nice and cuddly. A lot of things will no longer take place in England anyone either. For a time Harry and Crew will be globe trotting to find a way though,

## Chapter 22

### March of the Damned

Fredrick Gremmerswood was a muggle-born Auror of just under two years. A proud and loyal Hufflepuff who tried his best to stand for the virtues of his ancient school house and live them in all aspects of his life. Unfortunately, although he was lethal with a wand as most Aurors were, he could be naïve at times. Most times actually. In his training and personnel report his deductive reasoning was ranked one of the lowest in his class. Also instead of patrolling in a pair like was ordered he insisted that him and his partner could cover more ground if they split up and if anything happened they could send up a flare of warning. So the other Auror was on the other side of the village. These two facts were why Hogsmead would be visited with such atrocity this night.

Fredrick was patrolling the edge of the forbidden forest about a mile outside of Hogsmead. His wand was lit brightly as it swept the night-draped trees in quick arcs. Never pausing fast enough to see if anything was really there. His robes were a brilliant purple that seemed black against the dark background around him with hundreds of tiny yellow star patterns in various constellations. When he glimpsed a change in the shadows that could have been a movement his wand jolted in that direction to fall on a thick shrubbery.

“Hello? This is Auror Gremmerswood. There’s a curfew at the moment, so come on out now.” No answer. He shrugged and turned away when a soft moan directed him back to the foliage.

“Hello? Who’s there? Speak up, now!” he grew slightly irritable and strained his eyes through the wand light to try and see through the shrubbery. He started to step forward when he finally remembered his training. During the night it wasn’t wise to use lumos or other lighting spells. It ruined your night vision and gave your position away. He shook his wand and the light went out, leaving him momentarily blind. He started to blink a bit, trying to get used to the sudden blindness when he felt something heavy collide against him.

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Patricia and Herman Fiddlebee had a quaint and common magical home. A simple two story affair with soft colored woods, a cliché white picket fence, and a nice back yard that faced the forest for their two daughters, Maria and Lisa, to play in. Even a tire swing that dangled from a magical rope for the six year old and five year old girls to jump from.

Herman's eyes fluttered awake when he thought he heard a noise down stairs. He listened for a moment and heard it again-the banging of the back door swinging back and forth. He gave a soft curse for his daughters' forgetfulness at not closing the door before going to bed. He sighed and got out of bed, careful not to wake his loving wife next to him. He threw on his nightgown and slipped downstairs for the kitchen door. He paused at the doorway when he heard a moan coming from the other side.

He gave a great sigh as he realized his oldest, Lisa, was once again trying to sneak some ice cream late at night. "Lisa," he said with exasperation and walked through the swinging door into the kitchen "I thought your mother made it clear that you-" The words never finished, nor the scream that started to rise in his throat. Three Inferni fell on him in a heart beat, dragging him down while their hands clutched his throat and their decayed jaws sank into his skull with a wet crunch.

A dozen more lumbered through the open door and trudged upstairs, their moans moving ahead of their silent steps. They walked past their six brethren, three of whom knelt on the floor, ripping bites out of the twitching body of Herman's eldest; Lisa.

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A newlywed couple, enjoying their new home, were in the throes of passion; whispering and moaning each others names as a new set of moans meshed with theirs.

Triplets were snug in their long bed, dreaming of fairies, gnomes, and dancing sweets, when the door creaked open and their parents set slow bloodied feet through the doorway.

An elderly wizard dozed in his favorite chair in his den; his pipe hanging haphazardly from his mouth, and a book fallen closed in his lap as the jaws claimed his throat.

An old widow.

A middle-aged apothecarist.

A single mother and her infant son.

The Inferni marched through them all.

Across the village, alone on an empty dirt path, Auror Kittredge walked in the darkness. His eyes scrutinizing everything they fell on. He was too far away. He didn't know-couldn't know. No signal was sent. No cry for help heard. Clouds passed over the hidden new moon as the dead walked silently through Hogsmead.

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Minerva McGonagall sat at her grand, gold inlaid desk, going over the possible protections the school offered in the event of attack. The defenses were truly astounding. The many suits of armor and the gargoyles atop the battlements could come to her call. The castle itself could change the hallways and the stairs to lead invaders around in circles. The endless portraits could relay information and spy on attackers. The grounds themselves could open up and swallow people whole. And all that was not even considering the layers of wards, barriers and enchantments that had been etched into the very soil and stones for over a thousand years.

She had plans and then more plans, and should those fail, more plans under them. So why did she feel none of it would be enough? For the hundredth time that day she glanced back at the portrait of Albus in irritation. The old buffoon and friend had fled. His last words

when she had asked for his advice was that, 'his mistakes were done and past and that the world needed to make their own without his meddlesome ways', then had walked off and hadn't returned since.

So here she was. Alone and burdened with the responsibility of keeping the children safe during the current crisis. A crisis that seemed too far fetched and grand to be believable. Super Magic? Armies of the Undead? An entire country held hostage? It was like something out of a fantasy story that some of the students read. She couldn't discount the word of the Ministry, Harry and her best student, Hermione, however. If they said it was real, it was.

So when Hermione had raced up the stairs into her office, nearly shouting about the barrier around the country, she put... 'things', into motion. The Gates were humming with their best defenses, the suits of armor stood ready, their swords polished and sharpened, and the gargoyles flew lazy laps in the sky. The students were tucked safely away in their dorms with prefects making rotations to make sure no one would sneak out. The castle was fortified, so to speak.

She was rapidly thumbing through an old book that listed every spell, ward, barrier and defense that the old school had to offer, in hopes of bringing forth every tiny bit of protection she could, when she felt the dark hot tingle of magic at the base of her neck. The gates. Something dark was trying to make its way onto the grounds. She stood up slowly and walked up the small set of stairs and looked out a window that was nestled between a pair of book shelves. It was almost too dark to see anything in the distance, but the faint orange cast of the night and the pale violet glow the spell wrought iron, gave the vaguest of impressions of some sort of churning mass of shadows just out of sight. She strained her eye sight until she realized something. The night was orange. Her eyes lifted higher and with a gasp of dismay saw Hogsmead on fire in the distance.

She flew down the small flight of stairs like the wind and threw the floo powder in before she could even think of what she was doing and called the Ministry. A small office swam into view as she poked her head through and she saw a stern faced woman shuffling through some papers and separating them into five neat little stacks.

The woman's head swiveled in Minerva's direction and blinked a bit.

"What can I do for you Professor McGonagall?" she asked.

Minerva recognized her as Gertrude Gems, a former student some years back. "Yes, Mrs. Gems," she replied in a breathy voice, "I believe that Hogsmead is under attack and needs aid, quickly."

Gertrude's eyes widened slightly and took a hard look at something on a wall. Minerva couldn't see what. "The Aurors assigned to patrol that area haven't reported anything suspicious. Fires you say?"

Minerva bit back a scathing remark and just nodded. "Large enough to light up the gates of Hogwarts. Also, numerous dark creatures are attempting to force their way onto the grounds. We need help immediately."

"Help?" she heard the baritone voice of Mr. Weasley a moment before she walked into view. She cringed inwardly when she saw him. He looked a wreck. Like he hadn't ate or slept in a month, but his eyes were clear and focused, but lined with deep bags of stress and exhaustion. "Professor!" he greeted her with a tint of worry. "Is Hogwarts alright?"

She shook her head with slight exasperation and repeated what she had told young Mrs. Gems. Ron closed his eyes and his posture seemed to wilt and age in front of her.

"Something must've happened to the Aurors. We'll get help there at once. Thanks for letting us know, Professor," he told her solemnly.

"Thanks?" she scoffed incredulously, "Don't waste time thanking and bemoaning the issue. Save those people!"

Ron turned to Gertrude and gave her a quick nod. She turned and ran out of the room shouting a name Minerva couldn't make out. Ron knelt in front of the fireplace and let more of his worry show.

"Can Hogwarts hold for awhile?"

“Yes,” she told him. “If these are indeed Inferni then the defenses can hold them off indefinitely. Gargoyles, conjurations and animated armor have no need to worry about the dead. You just make sure those people in Hogsmead are ok. Go on, now. I have things to do,” and she closed the connection.

Ron knelt staring at the fireplace for a minute until he heard the pounding footsteps of a group running down the hallway. He stood up when his department, a mix of specialists from all branches of the Ministry, burst through the doorway. A cauldron of chaos, spilling through the door with robes and hats of every color and make. The sort of scene that could make yours eyes hurt if stared at too long.

“Boss, there an attack or something?” Flockhaven, his second in a command and a rather dangerous spell slinger from the Aurors, asked with a rather anxious look in his eyes. Ron knew the look. Felt it himself. An attack was bad, but it was finally a chance for the Ministry to do something. To let out the steam and anger that had built up after the O’Soule Manor bombing months back. The one that had left Ron in a coma.

“Yeah...Hogsmead.”

Flockhaven swore and spat at the ground, “What’s the plan?” he asked; the rest of the group looking on expectantly – ready to do whatever he ordered.

“We get the people out of there. Get anyone not currently working on the Muggle Aero-planes gathered in the Ministry Entrance. Aurors, MLE, DoM...anyone available. Keep the Aurors that are out on patrol where they are, though. Try to get in contact with all of them. If anyone hasn’t checked in assume that their area is under attack as well. Gertrude, get in touch with my brothers. Tell them to get all the product they’ve made so far ready for pick up. Jefferson, Grab everyone you can from Magical Games and send them there. Make sure they have their brooms and brief them. We’ll need them. Alright. We’ve discussed this. We’ve been expecting it. Let’s go save that town.”

Without a word the group scattered to their various roles and Ron alerted the Minister. With luck they could make it in time.

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Harry sat slumped over in a large velvet love seat. His head cradled in his hands while the three banshees that had become the hell of his life screeched at him. Their voices and arguments rising higher and higher over each other. A drowning tidal wave of...annoyance. It was partially his fault he guessed. Mostly Dimplewat's though. Yes definitely most of that perverted old flesh bag's fault. It had started innocently enough- the day that is. After they found out they couldn't get back home Harry took them to Paris to hook up with Dimplewat. His old mentor had ran off to Spain to gather up Laura, an old friend of Harry's who was a free lance hit-witch.

They met up at a café called 'La Beau Dame', The Fine Lady. A sultry little sidewalk affair that seemed to appeal to tourists with its menu of French delicacies and wine. When Dimplewat showed up with Laura in tow, Harry couldn't help but to smile and give her a warm hug. She was somewhat of a forceful personality with an outlandish fashion style. Hair that fell just past her shoulders in hundreds of tiny braids. Each died and glittered in the softest of blues, greens and whites, looking like a swaying glacier. Her stylish sun glasses rested on a slightly crooked nose that had obviously been broken once or twice. An extremely dark tan emphasized the white line a newly gained scar across her jaw that she didn't have the last time Harry saw her.

A tight black tee shirt with a low cut and a slight midriff showed a new belly piercing and tight jeans torn artfully in several delicious places. Her wand was tucked in her down the frown of her shift drawing his eye to her 'very' health cleavage. Although devoted to Ginny of course, he defiantly admired Laura's marvelous bosom.

"Laura!" he exclaimed. "Great to see you again!"

She gave him a wicked little wink and placed a kiss on his cheek and led him back to the table by the arm. "Hey there, Harry. Still a stud I see. Oh my..." her voice dropped when she spotted Ginny and Silvia seated at the table. "Who's this? Did you bring me some treats,

Harry?" she licked her lips as her eyes roamed and lingered over Silvia especially.

Ginny shifted and gave a slight blush while Silvia scowled and folded her arms.

"I am no one but Harry's...treat," Silvia said scathingly in her heavy accent.

Harry drew in a breath, but Laura gave a tinkling little laugh. "A shy little fire fly and a Russian bear! You've branched out I see." she threw another wink for Harry's benefit.

He coughed and helped her to her seat and introduced them to each other. Ginny and Laura immediately began to hit it off, while Silvia sat aloof on her own.

Dimplewat came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Why can't we get into that cesspool of a country, boy?" he asked.

Harry gestured to the last open seat at the table and paused before explaining while their server came with drinks and took their order. Once they were alone Harry pulled out a muggle news paper and dropped it on the table. "There's a barrier around the Isle. It's blocking all communication and travel. We even tried to call Sirius and Aurora, but whatever it is seemed to spot even magical creatures from passing. Muggle planes and boats can't seem to get past it either. It extends about a half mile from the coast. Lot of muggle deaths so far. They think it's some sort of terrorist weapon system or something like that," he motioned again at the paper, "We need to find a way through."

"Whatever you say, Stud," Laura replied after taking a swallow of her vodka. "As long as I get paid for this little war of yours."

"Err, Paid?" he asked.

Laura arched a brow and glared at Dimplewat. "Yes...paid. Dillius here said that you're paying 2,000 galleons for help."

Everyone turned to the suddenly bashful old wizard and stared him down. "Well...you said you needed help, Boy. She's a mercenary after all. Only fair to pay her."

"I agree," Laura defended her self whole-heartedly. "I risk my neck and you give me the gold. Don't like that, Stud?"

Harry waved the question off. "I'll pay it. I just didn't know that he was throwing my money around like that. I was kinda hoping you'd help out of self interest and friendship?" he gave her a pleading smile.

She leaned back and took another swallow slamming the empty glass on the table. "Nope. Money or no dice."

Harry gave another sigh and chalked up another big dent in his savings. "OK. We have to get back to England first though. Half now, half when we're finished?"

"Deal," Laura agreed and they shook on it. "So how do we get through this barrier you talked about?"

"Well, I have an idea. I need some materials though and don't know my way around. You lived here for awhile, right Laura?" She nodded. "Then I need a translator and for you to show me where the best shops are."

"What kind of shops?"

"An apothecary, a bank, and anyplace you know that sells raw uncut gems. Don't need high quality. Malachite, Lapis Lazuli and Quartz are fine," he told her.

"I can do that."

He furrowed his brows and thought for a moment. "We need a place to stay as well. Someplace that won't ask questions or complain about bad smells or odd noises."



“We could grab up a pricey apartment-hotel in the area. Could cost a bit depending on how long we’ll be here, but the more you pay the less questions are asked.”

“Great. Let’s do that first and we can hit the shops first thing tomorrow morning. You have your luggage?” he asked.

Laura nodded and patted at the bulge in her jeans pocket.

“Ok. Get us a place to stay.”

And that was how Harry found himself in the predicament they were in now.

Laura snagged them a very expensive Hotel flat that was running 150 Euros a day. It was spacious and very nice by Harry and Ginny’s standards. A little too nice to be honest. Silvia however raised hell when they walked in. She called it a rotten broom closet and demanded that they stay someplace else or that she at least be given her own place. Laura called her a pricy bitch and declared that the master suit was hers. Ginny cut that off and said since her and Harry were both paying for the, and were a couple, that they got the master bedroom. Silvia then told her that she should enjoy her time with Harry while it lasted because when he got tired of ‘slumming’ he would be in her arms.

All of that was manageable. ‘Was’...until Dimplewat decided to jump in and open his mouth. He told the three of them to just get naked and have their way with Harry and settle the matter. To which Silvia casually replied that she already had. At this remark Ginny screamed and threw herself bodily at Silvia accidentally knocking Laura’s vodka bottle away and shattering on the ground. Laura didn’t take kindly to this and hexed the pair of them. Before Harry knew it all three of them had various abnormalities growing out of their faces or were deformed in some way as the three of them cursed, punched, and wrestled each other around on the ground.

When the cat fight was over they were all standing in front of him screaming for his attention and for him to make the others fix whatever they’d done.

Harry peeked through his fingers at Dimplewat who was sitting in a chair with his feet propped up laughing at the scene. Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"SHUT THE BLOODY HELL UP!" He roared to his feet and set off a loud bang with his wand that sounded like a shotgun in the room. The women blinked and gaped in startlement, but thankfully quieted down.

"Now see here!" he shook his finger at each of them. "I've had about enough of this. From all of you," he looked especially hard at Ginny. "Ginny, Silvia is purposely trying to provoke you. Stop falling for it. Silvia, Ginny is my girlfriend and you and I are never going to get together. You're my friend, but damn you can be a bitch. Laura," he rounded on the last one who was looking at him dubiously, "we all know you're a strong witch. You don't need to prove it all the time and hex the first person who pisses you off."

"Now this is what we're gonna do," he continued without giving any of them a chance to reply. "Silvia will take the Master suit for no other reason than I refuse to hear her whining about it all day long."

"Whining!"

"I said, shut up!" her mouth closed in startlement.

"Laura. You'll take the smallest room since your getting paid a crap load of galleons. You've never needed anything before, don't abuse my generosity now. Ginny and I will take the other bedroom and no one better complain about anything else. Got it?" he glared at everyone.

"What about me, Boy? Why don't you get me a room of my own?" Dimplewat chuckled in cheekily.

"Sleep on the damn couch! If you don't like that, you've the money. Get your own damn place!"

"You're in a bad mood, Boy-"

“Keep pressing me and I’ll turn you into a rat and drop you off in front of an ally cat,” Harry interrupted with a slight snarl. Dimplewat got the hint and pressed his old pipe into his mouth.

“Anything else?” he asked with an arched brow.

“No.” “No.” “...No,” the three ladies replied demurely.

“Good. Now, some of us haven’t slept in two days so I suggest getting some sleep while we can.” With that he walked straight into the room he assigned himself and slammed the door.

When he woke up it was early in the morning. The sun had not yet risen. He looked over to see Ginny tucked snugly beside him. He paused and watched her as she slept. Her lips slightly parted. The soft whistle of her nose and she breathed in and out. He couldn’t help himself but to lean in and capture her lips gently. He hoped not to wake her, but she moaned and her eyes fluttered awake.

“Sorry I woke you,” he whispered in the darkness and tucked away that rebellious strand of hair that always fell over her face.

“Mmm, s’ok,” she replied and snuggled up closer to him her thin arm tucked in between him while her leg draped over his. “What time is it?” she asked; her eyes still closed contently in the warmth of his embrace.

“Early.” he looked over at the clock. “5 am.”

“Go back to sleep, Harry,” she told him, her voice already dropping away as her mind began to shut back down.

He resisted the urge to laugh and just placed a kiss on her forehead and pulled himself out of bed. Ginny groaned and cursed at him and pulled the sheets over her. He bit back another laugh and tucked her back in so she could get some more sleep. He then noticed a rather foul odor that he figured must be him. It had been awhile since he’d taken a bath and a lot had happened so that was first on the agenda.

When he was all done soaking in the steaming hot shower he stepped out and felt fresh and renewed. He shaved and combed his hair and used his best cleaning charm on his wrinkled and torn robes and transfigured them into a sweat shirt to go with his jeans. He threw them on and stepped into the living room of the apartment hotel. It was still quiet and he more carefully not to wake Dimplewat who was snoring on the couch. He made himself a cup of coffee and, switching on a lamp on the writing desk, used a pen and paper provided to get to work.

He began to write down complex formulas and recipes for his plan. The details were coming slowly. He usually had his books and notes at hand for this kind of work, but he'd made the things so many times, or stuff similar, that he felt confident in his knowledge. As the morning sun finally came around and began to peek through the shaded windows he had three neat piles of paper sorted out. One for various potions and another for the enchantments and charms needed. The third was a rather lengthy list of ingredients. Spools of copper, gold nuggets, gems of various size and name, and a plethora of various animal parts needed.

He stood up and made a second pot of coffee for the girls for when they woke up. He wasn't sure about Silvia, but he knew that Laura was a fiend for the stuff and Ginny absolutely unbearable if she didn't get her daily dose of caffeine in the morning. He set the timer and turned around to see Dimplewat flipping through the work he'd written up.

"Morning," Harry said and slipped past him towards the love seat.

"Ungh," Dillius grunted and put the papers back down. "You've been busy, Boy."

"Yeah. Woke up early. No sense wasting time going back to sleep. I've got to get this stuff ready as soon as possible."

Dimplewat plopped down in the seat across from him and eyed him carefully. "Looks like you're about to go to war there. Pretty dangerous stuff you're planning. If it goes wrong...boom."

Harry ran a cramped hand through his hair and gave a nod. "It's meant to go boom anyways."

"But if it's the bad kind of boom, who knows what could happen," he gave a shrug.

Harry turned the idea around in his mind awhile more, but couldn't find an alternative. "Best way to get back quickly. It's more than just the Wizarding community now. I mean, Merlin's sake, Dimp, Hundreds of people died in those crashes. Importing, Exporting. Banking. The list goes on. Not to mention what the Council could be doing right now. They obviously put this barrier up to keep us out. Sure there might be another way, but that could take months to work out and we don't have the money or time to waste on it."

"I know, I know, Boy," Dimplewat held up in hands. "Just sayin' is all. It's a bad boom if done wrong. The European Ministries will be working for years to get rid of the Magical Toxicity. Spells be going crazy and people will be sick for awhile. If it goes wrong that is."

"Well," Harry met his eyes, "We'll just have to make sure it goes right wont we?"

Dimplewat huffed and flashed a rotted smile that looked all the sicklier with his liver spots. "This is you're game, Boy. I'm just the comedic sidekick. I'll help you out with some things, but keep something like this away from me."

Harry growled and narrowed his eyes. "Oh no, no, no," he whispered threateningly, "that wasn't the deal, Dimp. I let you live out the rest of your life to try and do some good in this world. To make up for all the lives you've taken and the war you caused. In return you taught me all you knew about magic and agreed to help me when the time came. You owe it to too many. To Albus especially. You'll plunge into this head first or I tell the Aurors that you're still lurking around. See how far you get then."

Dimplewat snarled and drew his wand in a flash, Harry's tip meeting his in a blinding flash of sparks, but no spells. The old man breathed heavily and eyes the young man dispassionately.

"I'm getting tired of you holding that over my head, Harry Potter."

"Yeah? Well get used to it. You've the rest of your miserable life to adjust. Unlike the hundreds that died during your little reign."

"I'm trying to do good now, Boy. That doesn't mean I want to put myself in the line of fire. Self sacrifice might mean something to you, Potter, but it doesn't help me wipe the stains off my soul."

"The stains are gone. You asked me how to retrieve your soul from your Horcrux. I showed you. You asked me how to live a good life and what it meant to help people. I told you. You asked me to show you someplace nice and warm. I took you. You've taught me a lot. You owe the world a lot more, Gellert. I'm here to make sure you pay up."

They stared each other down for awhile until Dimplewat slowly lowered his wand and Harry did the same and they took their seats back.

"I'm trying, Boy...I'm trying." Dimplewat said and the tension of the moment slipped away.

"I know. You just have to understand. When it comes to helping people there is no half way. You can't partially save someone's life. You're living on borrowed time. Sooner or later we all die."

Dimplewat snorted and conjured himself a flask of...something that made him cough up a lung and his eyes water.

"Little early for that, don't you think?" Harry reprimanded.

"Bah. Never too early. Only too much."

Harry shook his head ruefully and heard the shower running. The girls were up, so he ordered breakfast and had the coffee ready when Ginny dragged herself into the room. He thought she looked awfully cute in the thick white bathrobe the hotel-apartment provided. Her hair tied up in a towel and her skin glistening from the fresh scrub.

She smelled of strawberries he noticed as she gave him a morning kiss and sat down at the table.

“Mmm, coffee! Thank you, Harry,” she said and delved into the steamy mug with relish.

“Morning. Sleep well?”

“Mmm Hmm. The shower was the best part. Merlin, I never thought water could feel so good.” She gave another yawn and rubbed at her eyes and looked around the room. She gave Dimplewat a smile and turned back to Harry. “Are the others up yet?”

“Not sure about Laura, but I heard Silvia humming. She’ll probably take forever to get ready. Breakfast should be here soon.”

She licked her lips and started to watch the door intently. “Good. I’m famished. Let there be bacon!”

True to his word Silvia took another hour to appear from her bedroom. Freshly showered and pampered with makeup and an absurd dress considering she wasn’t in London anymore. Laura, who had clamored in to the smell of breakfast and coffee, took offense to the old ballroom dress and made it a mission to outfit her comrade in arms. She hustled the indignant Russian Princess back into the master bedroom and came out with something much more tasteful. Simple jeans, a loose white blouse, a light leather jacket and her long hair straitened and cut to her waste.

Silvia stood hesitantly in the doorway watching him shyly; waiting for his opinion. He tilted his head and smiled at her. “Much better. You look great,” he told her.

The sun seemed to dawn on her face at the compliment, and the unabashed infatuation shown there made everyone in the room shudder. She had it bad.

Ginny leaned in close and whispered in his ear. “We really need to get her laid, Harry. That look is...sickening.”

He could only agree.

Shortly after, they threw on some coats and Laura bustled them around Paris to gather Harry's ingredients. She showed them some of the sights and Ginny and Silvia insisted that they be allowed to take a small tour of Paris and that Harry and Laura could handle the shopping on their own. He finally relented and then to two women go off on their own; inwardly cringing at the thought of having to bail them out of muggle jail or out of the French Ministry's clutches if they got into a fight.

Their first stop was the Paris branch of Gringotts to take out a loan. He signed an order for the transfer of funds to Laura's account and withdrew an additional 5,000 galleons to cover to cost of his supplies. Then they went shopping. She took them to the best apothecary in the country and he spent over 1,500 of the 5,000 Galleons on potions, potion ingredients, and a dozen cauldrons of different sizes and types. From copper, silver, and gold; to even a small one made of crystal and another of glass. He paid extra for same day delivery to their apartment with Laura looking on enviously at the money being thrown around.

"I should have asked for more," she grumbled as they walked through the twisting magical market place.

"You wouldn't of gotten it," he said to her complaint. "I'm about tapped out now as it is. I'll be lucky to have a couple hundred Galleons to my name when all this is over."

Laura looked on doubtfully, but didn't say anything else about it for the rest of the day.

They finally arrived back at their lavish little hotel six hours later to see the room crammed with the supplies they'd bought. Delivered via house-elves while they were still running around. Ginny and Silvia were still out, either behind bars or walking the streets of antiquity and enjoying the sites. Laura decided to stop by a bar once she dropped off some packages and left Harry and Dimplewat to their work.



When Ginny, Laura and Silvia finally strolled back in, laughing to Harry's surprise, he had a fairly large operation underway. Cauldrons were placed in several key spots around the room. Steaming and smoking in their effects of various colors from red to pink to gold and even an ominous black that bubbled thick unwholesomeness. The girls started around with a mix of curiosity- because none except Ginny had seen him work before, and apprehension-because any fairly educated magic user knew that this many potions in a cramped space could spell disaster.

"Umm, Harry? What's going on?" Ginny asked as she set down a shopping bag that was black to hide the contents.

He briefly looked up from stirring a potion in the small crystal cauldron. "Making weapons," he replied and went back to work.

The women inched closer, being mindful to stay away from the boiling brews that lined the walls to watch him.

"Stay out of the light," he warned Silvia when her shadow almost fell on his work.

She paused and took a step back. Her own education with her Great-Grandfather, the infamous Grigori Rasputin, gave her a hefty amount of respect when it came to potions and magic. "What will happen?" she dared to ask. She was raised to always ask and question everything. To learn from all around her.

"I didn't even know there were glass cauldrons, Harry," Ginny spoke up and tried to peek over his shoulder.

"It's crystal, not glass. There are glass cauldrons, but I don't like to use them. Crystal is best used with refining potions or filtering substances. Almost all potions in those categories use light to enhance their effects. To purify them. Crystal is best for that since it in essence filters light like a prism. The potion takes what colors it needs from the spectrum and ignored the rest. If you used glass then it will absorb all the colors making it less effective."

Ginny looked at him skeptically. "Harry, If I remember right you were never that good at potions."

"Harry is good at everything," Silvia defended him.

"Heh," his girl-friend scoffed, "you haven't seen him dance."

"Shhh," Harry told them to quiet down, "I need absolute quiet for this next part," He picked up some powdered Manticore heart. "This potion draws in sound as well as light. If it picks up the wrong sound it could explode."

"Right. Exploding- bad. No talking," Laura supplied and clamped her hands around Ginny and Silvia's mouth while Harry moved to add the powder.

He dipped it in slowly, switching between clockwise and counter-clockwise with every stir. The dark purple potion began to lighten to a periwinkle blue and the smoke that was poring forth before seemed to hiccup and get sucked back into the small cauldron. Harry then carefully withdrew his ladle and picked up a tuning fork. He rapped it once near the tips and held it in the fire under the crystal. After ten seconds it had a noticeable effect. The potion began to flicker with all the colors of the rainbow. A kaleidoscope of beauty. Harry leaned back and nodded to himself. He pulled out a dark leather bag and poured its contents. Dozens of dull blue stones tumbled out and splashed inside the liquid.

"Ok. This ones done for now," He said and turned up the heat, leaving the tuning fork there.

"What were those stones for?" Ginny asked when came up behind him and slipped her arm through his.

"Lapis Lazuli. The potion needs to boil down into the gems."

"And then what?" Silvia spoke and leaned over a gold cauldron to look at the glassy clear liquid inside.

“Dispelling stones,” he told them. “Very strong Finite Incantum effects. These particular ones will disable sight and sounds for wards or barriers. For a time anyways.”

“Are we going to try to ‘break through’ that barrier, Harry?” Ginny asked incredulously.

“Take a seat,” he motioned towards the couch and chairs. Once they were all arranged and watching him he told them his plan.

“We can’t bring the barrier down on our own. The most we might be able to do is make a hole. A very brief hole and try to slip through before it closes again. We can’t do that with spells alone. The barrier had to have been constructed using the technique in the Book of Phyre. So we need more than just wands. I’m going to make some weapons. The Dispelling stones are just some.”

“Just how many weapons are we talking about? And how long will it takes?” Laura asked while taking a swig of her Vodka.

Harry scratched his chin and ran the calculations. “I figure about a week baring no problems. And as for how many,” he stood up and dragged a large sack cloth back over and opened it up. Inside were several hundred different types of gems, minerals and rocks, “that many.”

Everyone goggled at the sack.

“You’re crazy...” one of them said.

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When the Ministry arrived, they arrived in force. Close to a hundred employees that could be gathered apperated in the center of Hogsmead. Ron immediately began coughing as the smoke permeated the air and made it impossible to breath.

“Someone get rid of this smoke!” he yelled out and almost coughed up a lung. His eyes started to burn and he knelt down, trying to get under the black smog. That was when the screaming began. All

around him everyone started shouting and crying out in pain. He glanced around from the ground trying to get a bead on the situation. Thankfully someone took his advice and several charms went up blowing the smoke away and giving the group a chance to gadget the situation.

It was bad. They were surrounded. Not by hundreds, but thousands of people. People bleeding, or dead, or mostly decomposed. Inferni.

“FIRE SPELLS! FIRE SPELLS!” He shouted out the command. Several of the things were too close to him so he quickly flung them away with a strong banishing charm and sent a fire ball hurling their way. It blasted against them and they lit up like tinder. They shuddered a bit and then stopped moving.

He heard and saw the blazing trail and heat of hundreds of fire based curses strike out against the attackers. Inferni were swathed in flame and final death, but they still kept coming. Six of the creatures broke through towards him, stumbling between the burning bodies of their brethren; arms reaching out hungrily; eager to make him a meal. His thoughts fell away. There was no strategy in this. No flanking or tactics. Just wave after wave of the undead piled shoulder deep with each other. All around them. They couldn't run. That would mean leaving any survivors or wounded to die. But they couldn't seem to win through. They could only hope to wear down the numbers until they could branch out and help the town. Losing Hogsmead was unacceptable. One of the few all magical communities in the world. A safe haven from muggles should they ever find out about them.

Those six Inferni almost reached him before he banished them away again and more replaced those. Thankfully, in preparation for meeting the Inferni, all Aurors and MLE personnel were required to learn and practice their incendiary spells- himself included. He pointed his wand and gave a twist. A small explosion of red hot fire engulfed a ground of the shambling dead and blasted them away. Behind him a sharp bang almost burst his ear drum and he looked to the side as Flockhaven's spell caught an Inferni about to grab him in the face; bowling the creature over and sending it to rest.

Ron didn't have time to give thanks as a thunderous detonation struck him in the back and sent him flying through the air. He crashed into several bodies and rolled along the ground. His vision dimming as he closed in on unconsciousness and the roar of the fires around him numbing away in a ringing silence. He felt several bodies press around and as he flung up his arms in defense a jarring pain ripped through his forearm. It brought him back to his situation with crystal clarity as he saw the gangrenous teeth of the undead latched firmly into his flesh. He cried out and swung his other arm around and punched the creature. It was ripped away from him, along with a large gouge of skin and muscle. White hot agony exploded behind his eyes and he dropped his wand by reflex to clutch the wound against him.

It was a mistake. In those few second between him getting flung away from the Ministry force and the vicious bite that almost took his arm off dozens of Inferni fell on top of him, their mouths opened wide for a feast with help held at bay, meters away, by the festering horde of the dead.

All he could see was a blackened and sickly maw, opened wide to feed on his face.

## Chapter 23